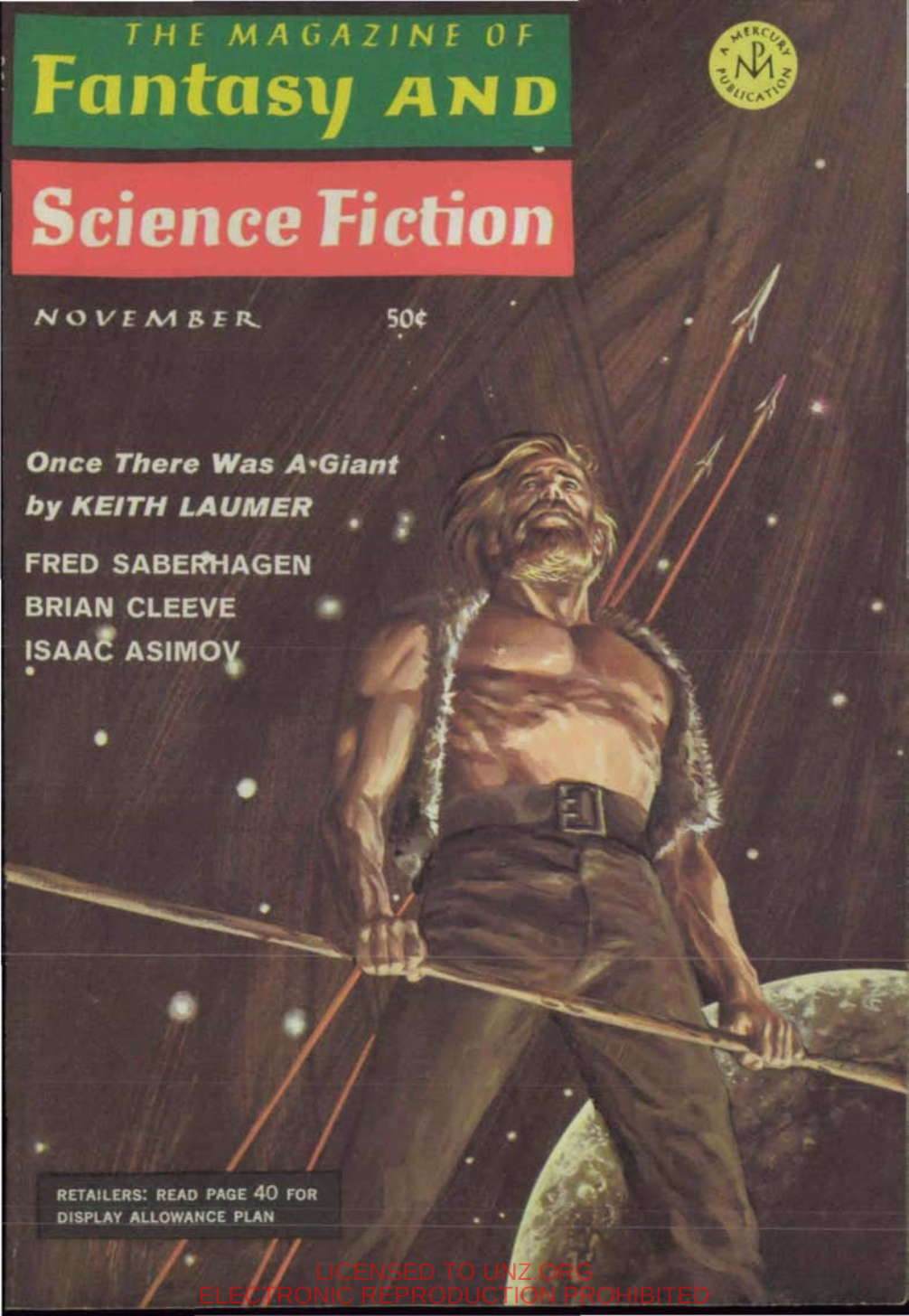

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Andrew Porter, ASSISTANT EDITOR — *Dale Beardale,* CIRCULATION MANAGER

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Since giants are supposed to lack the cunning of man, they are often depicted as victims, and mankind has observed this with a curious heightening of his own shaky self-esteem. ("The bigger they come, the harder they fall."—Bob Fitzsimmons) Keith Laumer's new story is about a giant—both in physique and spirit—and his battle for survival on a cold rock world named Vangard.

ONCE THERE WAS A GIANT

by Keith Laumer

FROM HALF A MILLION MILES out, Vangard was a sphere of gray cast iron, arc-lit yellow on the sunward side, coal-mine black on the other, with a wide band of rust red along the terminator. The mountain ranges showed up as crooked black hairlines radiating from the white dazzle of the poles, fanning out, with smaller ridges rising between them, to form a band of broken gridwork across the planet like the back of an old man's hand. She was a rock world, not massive but big, with twice Earth's land area to get lost in. I watched the detail grow on the screen until I could match it up with the lines of the nav chart. Then I broke the seal on my U-beamer and sounded my Mayday:

"King Uncle 629 calling CQ! I'm in trouble! I'm on emergency approach to R-7985-23-D, and it doesn't look good. My track is 093 plus 15, at 19:08, mark! Standing by for instructions, and make it fast! Relay, all stations!" I set the autosquawk to squirt the call out a thousand times in one-millisec bursts, then switched to listen and waited while forty-five seconds went past. That's how long it could take the hyper-signal to hit the beamer station off Ring 8 and bounce back an automatic AK.

The auto signal came in right on schedule; another half a minute passed, and a cold finger touched my spine. Then a voice that sounded like I shouldn't have disturbed its nap came in:

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"King Uncle 629, this is Monitor Station Z-448 reading you three-by-three. You are not, repeat *not,* cleared for planetfall at Vangard! Report full details—"

"Belay that!" I came back with plenty of edge. "I'm going to hit this rock; how hard depends on you! Get me down first and we'll handle the paper work later!"

"You're inside interdict range of a Class Five quarantined world, 629! This is an official Navigational Notice to sheer off—"

"Wise up, 448," I cut into that. "I'm seven hundred hours out of Dobie with special cargo aboard! You think I picked this spot to fuse down? I need a tech advisory and I need it now!"

Another wait; then my contact came back on, sounding tight-lipped: "King Uncle, transmit a board read-out."

"Sure, sure. But hurry it up." I sounded rattled. I pushed the buttons that gave him a set of duplicate instrument readings that would prove I was in even worse trouble than I claimed. It was no fake. I'd spent plenty to make sure the old tub had seen her last port.

"All right, King Uncle; you waited too long to make your report, you're going to have to jettison cargo and set up the following nav sequence—"

"I said special cargo!" I yelled back at him. "Category ten! I'm on a contract run for the Dobie med service. I've got ten freeze cases in my cold locker!"

"Uh, roger, King Uncle," the station came back, sounding a little off-balance now. "I understand: you have living casualties under cryothesis aboard. Stand by." There was a pause. "You've handed me a cosy one, 629," the voice added, sounding almost human.

"Yeah," I said. "Put some snap on it. That rock's coming up fast."

I sat and listened to the star-crackle. A light and a half away, the station computer would be going into action, chewing up the data from my board and spitting out a solution; and meanwhile, the sharp boy on duty would be checking out my story. That was fine with me. I wanted it checked. It was solid all down the line. The passengers lashed down in the cargo cell were miners, badly burned in a flash fire three months ago on Dobie, a mean little world with no treatment facilities. I was due to collect forty thousand when I delivered them to the med center on Commonweal in a viable condition. My pre-lift inspection was on file, along with my flight plan that would show my minimum-boost trajectory in past Vangard, just the way a shoestring operator would play it, on the cheap. It was all in the record. I was legitimate, a victim of circumstances. It was their ball now. And if my calculations were any

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good, there was only one way they could play it.

"King Uncle, you're in serious trouble," my unseen informant told me. "But I have a possible out for you. You're carrying a detachable cargo pod?" He paused as if he expected an answer, then went on. "You're going to have to ride her down, then jettison the pod on airfoils inside atmosphere. Afterwards, you'll have only a few seconds in which to eject. Understood? I'll feed you the conning data now." A string of numbers rattled off to be automatically recorded and fed into the control sequencer.

"Understand, 448," I said when he finished. "But look—that's wild country down there. Suppose the cooler's damaged in the drop? I'd better stay with her and try to set her down easy."

"Impossible, King Uncle!" The voice had warmed up a few degrees. After all, I was a brave if penny-pinching merchant captain, determined to do my duty by my charges even at the risk of my own neck. "Frankly, even this approach is marginal. Your one chance—and your cargo's—is to follow my instructions implicitly!" He didn't add that it was a criminal offense not to comply with a Monitor's navigational order. He didn't have to. I knew that, was counting on it.

"If you say so. I've got a marker circuit on the pod. But listen, how long will it take for you fellows to get a relief boat out here?"

"It's already on the way. The run will take . . . just under three hundred hours."

"That's over twelve standard days!" I allowed the short pause required for the slow mental process of a poor but honest spacer to reach some simple conclusions, then blurted: "If that freeze equipment's knocked out, the insulation won't hold low-0 that long! And . . ." Another pause for the next obvious thought to form. "And what about me? How do I stay alive down there?"

"I'm giving you a course that will put you down in walking distance of help. Now—"

"What help?" I butted in. "There's nobody down there, hasn't been for a hundred years!"

"Just follow instructions, King Uncle." Some of the sympathy had slipped, but not much; even a hero is entitled to give some thought to staying alive, after he's seen to the troops. "There's a . . . man down there."

"You're crazy!" I yelped. "I checked; there used to be some kind of colony, but they died, killed off by a virus—"

"One's still alive. Can the chatter and get this . . ."

There was a little more talk, but the important things had all been said. I was following orders, doing what I was told, no more, no less. Inside the hour, the whole

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tri-D watching public of the Sector would know that a disabled hospital ship was down on Vangard, with ten men's lives—eleven, if you counted mine—hanging in the balance. And I'd be inside the target's defenses, in position for phase two.

At ten thousand miles, the sound started up: the lost, lonely wail of air molecules being split by five thousand tons of over-aged tramp freighter, coming in too fast, on a bad track, with no retros working. I worked with what was left of the attitude jets, jockeying her around into a tail-first position, saving the last of my reaction mass for when and where it would do the most good. When I had her where I wanted her, I had less than eight thousand miles of gravity well to work with. I played with the plotting board, pin-pointing my target area, while she bucked and buffeted under me and the moans rose to howls like gut-shot beasts.

At two hundred miles, the drive engines cut in and everything turned to whirly red lights and pressures like a toad feels under a boot. That went on long enough for me to pass out and come to half a dozen times. Then suddenly she was tumbling in free fall and there were only seconds left. Getting a hand on the pod release was no harder than packing an anvil up a mile of rope ladder; I felt the shock as the cargo section blasted free and away. I got myself into position, clamped the shock-frame down, took a last lungful of stale ship air, slapped the eject button; and ten tons of feather pillow hit me in the face and knocked me into another world.

I swam up out of the big black ocean where the bad dreams wait and popped through into the watery sunshine of semi-consciousness in time to get a fast panoramic view of mountains like shark's teeth ranked in snow-capped rows that marched across the world to a serrated horizon a hundred miles away. I must have blacked out again, because the next second a single peak was filling the bull's-eye screen, racing toward me like a breaking wave. The third time I came up, I was on chutes, swaying down toward what looked like a tumbled field of dark lava. Then I saw that it was foliage; green-black, dense, coming up fast. I just had time to note that the pod locator marker was blinking green, meaning it was down and intact, before the lights went out again.

This time I woke up cold: that was the first datum that registered. The second was that my head hurt; that, and all the rest of me. It took me long enough to write a will leaving everything to the Euthanasia Society to get un-

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strapped and crack the capsule and crawl out into what the outdoorsy set would have called the bracing mountain air. I tallied my aches and pains, found the bones and joints intact. I ran my suit thermostat up and felt some warmth begin to seep into me.

I was lying on pine needles, if pine needles come in the three-foot length, the diameter of a swizzle stick. They made a springy carpet that covered the ground all around the bases of trees as big as Ionic columns that reached up and up into a deep green twilight. Far off among the tree trunks I saw the white gleam of snow patches. It was silent, utterly still, with no movement, not even a stir among the wide boughs that spread overhead. My suit instruments told me the air pressure was 16 PSI, oxygen content 51 percent, the ambient temperature minus 10 degrees Centigrade, gravity .6 standard, as advertised. The locator dials said the pods were down just over a hundred miles north by east from where I stood. As far as I could tell from the gadgets fitted into my fancy harness buckle, everything there was operating normally. And if the information I had gathered was as good as the price said it ought to be, I was within ten miles of where I had planned to be, half a day's walk from Johnny Thunder's stamping ground. I set my suit controls for power assist and got on my feet, took a compass reading and started hiking.

The low gravity made the going easy, even for a man who had been pounded by a few thousand miles of atmosphere; and the suit I was wearing helped, too. You couldn't tell it to look at it, but it had cost me the price of a luxury retirement on one of those rhodium-and-glass worlds with a taped climate and hot and cold running orgies. In addition to the standard air and temperature controls, and the servo-booster that took the ache out of walking, it was equipped with every reflex circuit and sense amplifier known to black market science, including a few the League security people would like to get their hands on. The metabolic monitor gear alone was worth the price.

I took a break at the end of the first hour, gave myself a squirt of nutrient syrup and swallowed some water and listened to eternity passing, one second at a time. I thought about a shipload of colonists, back in the primitive dawn of space travel, setting off into a Universe they knew less about than Columbus did America, adrift for nine years before they crash-landed here. I thought about them stepping out into the great silence of this cold world—men, women, probably children—knowing that there would never, ever be any returning for them. I thought about them facing that

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—and going on to live. They'd been tough people, but their kind of toughness had gone out of the world. Now there was only the other kind; my kind. They were pioneer-tough, frontier-tough, full of unfounded hope and determination and big ideas about the future. I was big-city-tough, smart-tough, rat-tough; and the present was enough for me.

"It's the silence," I said aloud. "It gets to you." But the sound of my voice was too small against all that emptiness. I got to my feet and started off toward the next ridge.

It's curious how, after a lifetime surrounded by noises, a few hours without them can change your whole attitude toward air vibrations in the audible range. All I heard was a faint, whooping call, like a lonely sea bird yearning for his mate; but I came away from the tree I'd been resting under as though it had turned red-hot and stood flat-footed, my head cocked, metering the quality of the sound for clues. It got louder, which meant closer, with a speed that suggested the futility of retreat. I looked around for a convenient sapling to climb, but these pines were born old; the lowest branch was fifty feet up. All that was left in the way of concealment was a few thousand tree trunks. Somehow I had the feeling I'd rather meet whatever it was out in the open. At least I'd see it as soon as it saw me. I knew it was something that was alive and ate meat; a faint, dogmatic voice from my first ancestor was telling me that. I did the thing with the wrist that put the bootleg miniature crater gun in my palm and waited, while the booming call got louder and more anguished, like a lovelorn sheep, a heart-broken bull, a dying elk. I could hear the thud of big feet now, galloping in a cadence that, even allowing for the weak gravity field, suggested ponderous size. Then it broke through into sight, and confirmed great-grandpa's intuition. It wasn't a hound, or even a hyaenodon, but it was what a hyaenodon would have been if it had stood seven feet at the shoulder, had legs as big around at the ankle as my thigh, a head the size of a one-man helicab and jaws that could pick a man up like Rover trotting home with the evening paper. Maybe it was that last thought that kept my finger from twitching on the firing stud. The monster dog skidded to a halt in a slow-motion flurry of pine needles, gave a final bellow, and showed me about a yard of bright red tongue. The rest of him was brown and black, sleek-furred, loose-hided. His teeth were big, but not over six inches from gum line to needle point. His eyes were shiny black and small, like an elephant's, with crescents of red un-

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der them. He came on slowly, as if he wanted to get a good look at what he was eating. I could hear his joints creak as he moved. His shoulders were high, molded with bunched muscle. At each step his foot-wide pads sank into the leaf mold. I'd read all about how in low-G conditions animals grow to abnormal size, but seeing it in the flesh was different. I felt my knees begin to twitch, while what hackles I had did their best to stand on end. The dog was ten feet away now, and his breath snorted like steam around a leaky piston through nostrils I could have stuck a fist into. If he came any closer, I knew I would push that stud, ready or not.

"Down, boy!" I said in what I hoped was a resonant tone of command. He halted, hauled in the tongue, let it out again, then lowered his hind quarters gingerly, like an old lady settling into her favorite rocker. He sat there and looked at me, and I looked back. And while we were doing that, the giant arrived.

He came up silently along an aisle among the big trees, and was within fifty feet of me before I saw him, big as he was.

And big he was.

It's easy to talk about a man twelve feet high; that's just about twice normal, after all. Just a big man, and let's crack a joke about his shoe size.

But twice the height is four times the area of sky he blanks off as he looms over you, eight times the bulk of solid bone and muscle. Sixteen hundred pounds of man, at Earth-normal G. Here he weighed no more than half a ton, but even at that, each leg was holding up five hundred pounds. They were thick, muscle-corded legs, matching the arms and the chest and the neck that was like a section of hundred-year oak supporting the big head. But massive as he was, there was no distortion of proportion. Photographed without a midget like me in the picture for scale, he would have looked like any other Mister Universe contender, straight-boned, clean-limbed, every muscle defined, but nothing out of scale. His hair was black, curly, growing in a rough-cut mane, but no rougher than any other man that lives a long way from a barber. He had a close-trimmed beard, thick black eyebrows over wide-set, pale blue eyes. His skin was weather-burned the color of well-used cowhide. His features were regular enough to be called handsome, if you admire the Jove-Poseidon type. I saw all this as he came striding up to me, dressed in leather, as light on his feet as the dog was heavy. He stopped beside the pooch, patted his head carelessly with a hand the size of first base, looking down at me, and for a ghostly instant, I was a child

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again, looking up at the Brobdingnagian world of adults. Thoughts flashed in my mind, phantom images of a world of warmth and love and security and other illusions long forgotten. I pushed those away and remembered that I was Baird Ulrik, professional, out on a job, in a world that had no place for fantasies.

"You're the man they call Johnny Thunder," I said.

He let that pass. Maybe he smiled a little.

"I'm Patton. Carl Patton. I bailed out of a ship." I pointed to the sky.

He nodded, "I know," he said. His voice was deep, resonant as a pipe organ; he had a lot of chest for it to bounce around in. "I heard your ship fall." He looked me over, didn't see any compound fractures. "I'm glad you came safely to ground. I hope Woola did not frighten you." His lingua sounded old-fashioned and stilted, with a trace of a strange accent. My trained poker face must have slipped a couple of feet at what he said, because he smiled. His teeth were square and porcelain white.

"Why should he?" I said without squeaking. "I've seen my three-year old niece pat a Great Dane on the knee. That was as high as she could reach."

"Come back with me to my house. I have food, a fire."

I paused just a second, the way you do before the big one. Then I looked noble and shook my head.

"I've got to get to my cargo pod. There are ten men back there."

His face asked questions.

"They're alive—so far," I said. "I have a machine that tells me the pod landed safely, on her chutes. The canisters are shock mounted, so if the locator gear survived, so did they. But the equipment might not have. If it was smashed, they'll die." I explained how low-0 worked.

"This is a strange thing," he said, "to freeze a living man."

"They wouldn't be living long, if they weren't," I told him. "Third-degree burns over their whole bodies. Probably internal damage too. At the med center they can put 'em in viv tanks and regrow their hides. When they wake up, they'll be as good as new." I gave him a significant look, full of do-or-die determination. "If I get there in time, that is. If they come out of it out there . . ." I let the sentence die off without putting words to the kind of death that would be. I made a thing out of looking at the show dials on my wrist. "The pod is down somewhere in that direction." I pointed away up-slope, to the north. "I don't know how far." I shot a look at him to see how that last datum went over. The less I gave away, the better. But he sounded a little more sophisticated than my researches had led me to

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expect. A slip now could queer everything. "Maybe a hundred miles, maybe more."

He looked in the direction I pointed. "It is cold there."

"If the freezers are out, the insulation will hold them for a couple of hundred hours, maybe. No more. The relief ship can't make it in under three hundred."

He thought that one over, looking down at me. His eyes were friendly enough, but in a remote way, like a candle burning in the window of an empty house.

He looked away to the north, "That is bad country, where they have fallen. The Towers of Nandi are high."

I knew that; I'd picked the spot with care. I gave him my manly, straight-from-the-shoulder look. "I've got to do what I can."

His eyes came back to mine. For the first time, a little fire seemed to flicker a light behind them.

"First you must rest and eat."

I could have said more, to set the hook, but instead I nodded. "All right," I took a step, and felt the world start a slow spin under me. I stopped to catch my balance and a luminous sleet was filling the air, and then the whole thing tilted sideways and I slid off and down into the black place that always waited . . .

I woke up looking at a dancing pattern of orange light on a ceiling of polished red and black wood twenty feet overhead. The light was coming from a fire big enough to roast an ox in, blazing away on a hearth built of rocks the size of tombstones. I was lying on a bed not as large as a handball court, and the air was full of the odor of soup. I sat up and crawled to the edge and managed the four-foot jump to the floor, on legs that felt like overcooked *pasta*. My ribs ached—probably from a long ride over the giant's shoulder.

He looked across at me from the big table. "You were tired," he said. "And you have many bruises."

I looked down. I was wearing my underwear, nothing else.

"My suit!" I barked, and the words came out thick, not just from weakness. I was picturing sixty-grand worth of equipment and a million-credit deal tossed into the reclaimer—or the fire—and a clean set of overalls laid out to replace them.

"There," my host nodded to the end of the bed. I grabbed, checked. Everything looked OK. But I didn't like it, and I didn't like the idea of being helpless, tended by a man I had business with later.

"You have rested," the big man said. "Now eat."

I sat at the table on a pile of blankets and dipped into a dishpanful of thick broth made of sa-

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very red and green vegetables and chunks of tender white meat. There was bread that was tough and chewy, with a flavor of nuts, and a rough purple wine that went down better than the finest vintage of Arondo's, on Plaisir 4. Afterwards, the giant unfolded a chart and pointed to a patch of high relief like coarse-troweled stucco.

"If the pod is there," he said, "it will be difficult. But perhaps it fell here." He indicated a smoother stretch to the south and east of the badlands.

I went through the motions of checking the azimuth on the indicator; the heading I gave him was only about three degrees off true. At 113.8 miles—the position the R&D showed for the pod—we would miss the target by about ten miles.

The big man laid off our line of march on his map. It fell along the edge of what he called the Towers of Nandi.

"Perhaps," he said. He wasn't a man given to wasting words.

"How much daylight is left?" I asked him.

"Fifty hours, a little less." That meant I'd been out for nearly six hours. I didn't like that, either. Time was money, and my schedule was tight.

"Have you talked to anyone?" I looked at the big, not quite modern screen at the side of the room. It was a standard Y-band model with a half-millionth L lag. That meant a four hour turn-around time to the Ring 8 Station.

"I told the monitor station that you had come safely to ground," he said.

"What else did you tell them?"

"There was nothing more to tell."

I stood. "You can call them again now," I said, "and tell them I'm on my way out to the pod." I gave it the tight-lipped no-tears-for-me delivery. From the corner of my eye I saw him nod, and for a second I wondered if maybe the famous Ulrik system of analysis had slipped, if this big hunk of virility was going to sit on his haunches and let poor frail little me tackle the trail alone.

"The way will not be easy," he said. "The winds have come to the high passes. Snow lies on the heights of Kooclain."

"My suit heater will handle that part. If you can spare me some food. . . ."

He went to a shelf, lifted down a pack the size and shape of a climate unit for a five room conapt. I knew then my trap was closing dead on target.

"If my company will not be unwelcome, Carl Patton, I will go with you," he said.

Johnny Thunder took the lead, swinging along at an easy amble that covered ground at a deceptive rate, not bothered by the big

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pack on his back. The only weapon he carried was a ten-foot steel-shod staff. The monster mutt trotted alongside, nose to the ground; I brought up the rear. My pack was light; the big man pointed out that the less I carried the better time we'd make. My bones still ached some, but I was feeling frisky as a colt in the low-G. We did a good hour without talking, working up along the angle of a long slope through the big trees. We crested the rise, and the big fellow stopped and waited while I came up, puffing a little, but game as they come.

"We will rest here," he said.

"Rest hell," I came back. "Minutes may make all the difference to those poor devils."

"A man must rest," he said reasonably, and sat down, propping his bare arms on his knees. This put his eyes on a level with mine,—standing. I didn't like that, so I sat too.

He took his full ten minutes before starting off again. Johnny Thunder, I saw, was not a man to be bullied. He knew his best pace. I was going to have my hands full making it all work out according to plan.

We crossed a wide valley and headed up into high country. It was cold, and the trees were sparser here, gaunter, dwarfed by the frost and twisted by the winds into hunched shapes that clutched the rock like arthritic hands. There were patches of rotten snow and a hint in the sky that there might be more to come before long. Not that I could feel the edge of the wind that came whipping down off the peaks, but the giant was taking it on his bare arms.

"Don't you own a coat?" I asked him at the next stop. We were on a shelf of rock, exposed to the full blast of what was building to a forty-mile gale.

"I have a cape, here," he slapped the pack on his back. "Later I will wear it."

"You make your own clothes?" I was looking at the tanned leather, fur side in, the big sailmaker's stitches.

"A woman made these garments for me," he said. "That was long ago."

"Yeah," I said. I tried to picture him with his woman, to picture her, how she'd move, what she'd look like. A woman ten feet tall.

. . .

"Do you have a picture of her?"

"Only in my heart." He said it matter-of-factly, as if it were a ritual phrase. I wondered how it felt to be the last of your kind, but I didn't ask him that. Instead I asked, "Why do you do it? Live here alone?"

He looked out across a view of refrigerated rock. "It is my home," he said. Another automatic answer, with no thought behind it. It just didn't get to this overgrown

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plowboy. It never occurred to him how with the help of a smart promotor he could milk the situation for tears and cash from a few billion sensation-hungry tri-D fans. A real-life soap opera. The end of the trail. Poor Johnny Thunder, so brave and so alone. . . .

"Why do *you* do—what you do?" he asked suddenly. I felt my gut clench like a fist.

"What's that suppose to mean?" I got it out between my teeth, while my hand tickled the crater gun out of its wrist-clip and into my palm.

"You too live alone, Carl Patton. You captain a ship of space. You endure solitude and hardship. And as now, you offer your life for your comrades."

"They're not my comrades," I snapped. "They're cash cargo, that's all. No delivery, no payment. And I'm not offering my life. I'm taking a little hike for my health."

He studied me. "Few men would attempt the Heights of Kooclain in this season. None without a great reason."

"I've got a great reason. Forty thousand of them."

He smiled a faint smile. "You are many things, I think, Carl Patton. But not a fool."

"Let's hit the trail," I said. "We've got a long way to go before I collect."

Johnny Thunder held his pace back to what he thought I could manage. The dog seemed a little nervous, raising his nose and snuffling the air, then loping ahead. I easy-footed it after them, with plenty of wheezing on the upslopes and some realistic panting at the breaks, enough to make me look busy, but not enough to give the giant ideas of slowing down. Little by little I upped the cadence in an unobtrusive way, until we were hitting better than four miles per hour. That's a good brisk stride on flat ground at a standard G; it would take a trained athlete to keep it up for long. Here, with my suit's efficient piezoelectronic muscles doing most of the work, it was a breeze—for me.

We took a lunch break. The big man dug bread and cheese and a jeroboam of wine out of his knapsack and handed me enough for two meals. I ate most of it and tucked the rest into the disposal pocket on my shoulder when he wasn't looking. When he finished his ration—not much bigger than mine—I got on my feet and looked expectant. He didn't move.

"We must rest now for an hour," he told me.

"OK," I said. "You rest alone. I've got a job to do." I started off across the patchy snow and got about ten steps before Bowser gallumphed past me and turned, blocking my route. I started past him on the right and he moved

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into my path. The same for the left.

"Rest, Carl Patton," Goliath said. He lay back and put his hands under his head and closed his eyes. Well, I couldn't keep him walking, but I could cut into his sleep. I went back and sat beside him.

"Looks like nobody's ever been here before," I added. "Not a beer can in sight." That didn't net a reply either.

"What do you live on in this place?" I asked him. "What do you make the cheese out of, and the bread?"

He opened his eyes. "The heart of the friendly tree. It is pulverized for flour, or made into a paste and fermented."

"Neat," I said. "I guess you import the wine."

"The fruit of the same tree gives us our wine." He said "us" as easily as if he had a wife, six kids, and a chapter of the Knights of Pythias waiting for him back home.

"It must have been tough at first," I said. "If the whole planet is like this, it's hard to see how your ancestors survived."

"They fought," the giant said, as if that explained everything.

"You don't have to fight anymore," I said. "You can leave this rock now, live the easy life somewhere under a sun with a little heat in it."

The giant looked at the sky as if thinking. "We have a legend of a place where the air is soft and the soil bursts open to pour forth fruit. I do not think I would like that land."

"Why not? You think there's some kind of kick in having things rough?"

He turned his head to look at me. "It is you who suffer hardship, Carl Patton. I am at home; whereas you endure cold and fatigue, in a place alien to you."

I grunted. Johnny Thunder had a way of turning everything I said back at me like a ricochet. "I heard there was some pretty vicious animal life here," I said. "I haven't seen any signs of it."

"Soon you will."

"Is that your intuition, or . . . ?"

"A pack of snow-scorpions have trailed us for some hours. When we move out into open ground, you will see them."

"How do you know?"

"Woola tells me."

I looked at the big hound, sprawled out with her head on her paws. She looked tired.

"How does it happen you have dogs?"

"We have always had dogs."

"Probably had a pair in the original cargo," I said. "Or maybe frozen embryos. I guess they carried breed stock even way back then."

"Woola springs from a line of dogs of war. Her forebear was the mighty courser Standfast, who

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slew the hounds of King Roon on the Field of the Broken Knife."

"You people fought wars?" He didn't say anything. I snorted. "I'd think as hard as you had to scratch to make a living, you'd have valued your lives too much for that."

"Of what value is a life without truth? King Roon fought for his beliefs. Prince Dahl fought for his."

"Who won?"

"They fought for twenty hours; and once Prince Dahl fell, and King Roon stood back and bade him rise again. But in the end Dahl broke the back of the King."

"So—did that prove he was right?"

"Little it matters what a man believes, Carl Patton, so long as he believes it with all his heart and soul."

"Nuts. Facts don't care who believes in them."

The giant sat up and pointed to the white peaks glistening far away, proud and aloof as a company of kings. "The mountains are true," he said. He looked up at the sky, where high, blackish-purple clouds were piled up like battlements. "The sky is true. And these truths are more than the facts of rock and gas."

"I don't understand this poetic talk," I said. "It's good to eat well, sleep in a good bed, to have the best of everything there is. Anybody that says otherwise is a martyr or a phoney."

"What is the best, Carl Patton? Is there a couch softer than weariness? A better sauce than appetite?"

"You got that out of a book."

"If you crave the easy luxury you speak of, why are you here?"

"That's easy. To earn the money to buy the rest."

"And afterwards—if you do not die on this trek—will you go there, to the pretty world, and eat the fat fruits picked by another hand?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?" I felt myself sounding mad, and wondered why; and that made me madder than ever. I let it drop and pretended to sleep.

Four hours later we topped a long slope and looked out over a thousand square miles of forest and glacier, spread out wide enough to hint at the size of the world called Vangard. We had been walking for nine hours and, lift unit and all, I was beginning to feel it. Big Boy looked as good as new. He shaded his eyes against the sun that was too small and too bright in a before-the-storm sort of way, and pointed out along the valley's rim to a peak a mile or two away.

"There we will sleep," he said.

"It's off our course," I said. "What's wrong with right here?"

"We need shelter and a fire, Holgrimm will not grudge us these."

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"What's Holgrimm?"

"His lodge stands there."

I felt a little stir along my spine, the way you do when ghosts come into the conversation. Not that the ghosts worry me; just the people that believe in them.

"To hell with it," I said. "Let's go get this sleeping over with. It looks like a rough day tomorrow."

We covered the distance in silence. Woola, the dog, did a lot of sniffing and grunting as we came up to the lodge. It was built of logs, stripped and carved and stained black. There was a steep gabled roof, slate-tiled, and a pair of stone chimneys and a few small windows with colored glass leaded into them. The big man paused when we came into the clearing, stood there leaning on his stick and looking around. The place seemed to be in a good state of preservation. But then it was built of the same rock and timber as the country around it. There were no fancy trimmings to weather away.

"Listen, Carl Patton," the giant said. "Almost, you can hear Holgrimm's voice here. In a moment, it seems, he might throw wide the door to welcome us."

"Except he's dead," I said. I went up to the entrance, which was a slab of black and purple wood that would have been right in scale on the front of Notre Dame. I strained two-handed at the big iron latch with no luck. Johnny Thunder lifted it with his thumb.

It was cold in the big room. The coating of frost on the polished purple wood floor crunched under our boots. In the deep-colored gloom, I saw stretched animal hides on the high walls, green- and red- and gold-furred, brilliant as a Chinese pheasant. There were other trophies: a big, beaked skull three feet long, with a spread of antlers like wings of white ivory, that swept forward to present an array of silver dagger-tips, black-ringed. There was a leathery-skinned head that was all jaw and teeth and a tarnished battle axe, ten feet long, with a complicated head. A long table was in the center of the room between facing fireplaces as big as city apartments. I saw the wink of light on the big metal goblets, plates, cutlery. There were high-backed chairs around the table, and in the big chair at the far end, facing me, a gray-bearded giant sat with a sword in his hand. The dog whined, a sound that expressed my feelings perfectly.

"Holgrimm awaits us," Johnny's big voice said softly behind me. He went forward, and I broke the paralysis and followed. Closer, I could see the fine frosting of ice that covered the seated giant, glittering in his beard, on the back of his hands, across his open eyes.

Ice rimed the table and the dishes and the smooth black wood of the chairs. Woola's claws rasped loud on the floor.

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"Don't you bury your dead?" I got the words out, a little ragged.

"His women prepared him thus, at his command, when he knew his death was on him."

"Why?"

"That is a secret which Holgrimm keeps well."

"We'd be better off outside," I told him. "This place is like a walk-in freezer."

"A fire will mend that."

"Our friend here will melt. I think I prefer him the way he is."

"Only a little fire, enough to warm our food and make a bed of coals to lie beside."

There was wood in a box beside the door, deep red, hard as granite, already split into convenient sizes. Convenient for my traveling companion, I mean. He shuffled the eight-foot long, eighteen-inch diameter logs as if they were bread sticks. They must have been full of volatile oil, because they lit off on the first match and burned with a roaring and a smell of mint and camphor. Big Johnny brewed up a mixture of hot wine and some tarry syrup from a pot on the table that he had to break loose from the ice and handed me a half gallon pot of the stuff. It was strong but good, with a taste that was almost turpentine but turned out to be ambrosia instead. There was bread and cheese and a soup he stirred up in the big pot on the hearth. I ate all I could and wasted some more. My large friend gave himself a Spartan ration, raising his mug to the host before he drank.

"How long has he been dead?" I asked.

"Ten of our years." He paused, then added: "That would be over a hundred, League standard."

"Friend of yours?"

"We fought; but later we drank wine together again. Yes, he was my friend."

"How long have you been . . . alone here?"

"Nine years. Holgrimm's house was almost the last the plague touched."

"Why didn't it kill you?"

He shook his head. "The Universe has its jokes, too."

"How was it, when they were all dying?"

The big man cradled his cup in his hands, looking past me into the fire. "At first, no one understood. We had never known disease here. Our enemies were the snow wolf and the avalanche and the killing-frost. This was a new thing, the foe we could not see. Some died bewildered, others fled into the forest where their doom caught them at last. Oxandra slew his sons and daughters before the choking death could take them. Joshal stood in the snow, swinging his war-axe and shouting taunts at the sky until he fell and rose no more."

"What about your family?"

"As you see."

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"What?"

"Holgrimm was my father."

We slept rolled up in the furs Johnny Thunder took down from the walls and thawed on the hearth. He was right about the heat.. The big blaze melted the frost in a ten foot semicircle, but didn't touch the rest of the room. It was still early afternoon outside when we hit the trail. I crowded the pace all I could. As far as I could tell, it didn't bother the big man, but Woola was suffering. At the break, she stretched out on her side, looking like a dead horse, if dead horses had tails that wagged when their name was mentioned, and ribs that heaved with the effort of breathing the thin air. Thin by Vangard standards, that is. Oxygen pressure was still over Earth-normal.

"Why not send her back?" I asked the giant.

"She would not go. And we will be glad of her company when the snow-scorpions come."

"Back to that, eh? You sure you're not imagining them? This place looks as lifeless as a tombstone quarry."

"They wait," he said. "They know me, and Woola. Many times have they tried our alertness—and left their dead on the snow. And so they follow, and wait."

"My gun will handle them." I showed him the legal slug-thrower I carried; he looked at it politely.

"A snow-scorpion does not die easily," he said.

"This packs plenty of kick," I said, and demonstrated by blasting a chip off a boulder twenty yards away. The *car-rong!* echoed back and forth among the big trees. He smiled a little.

"Perhaps, Carl Patton."

We slept the night at the timber line.

The next day's hike was different, right from the beginning. On the open ground the snow had drifted and frozen into a crust that held my weight, but broke under the giant's feet, and the dog's. There was no kidding about me pushing the pace now. I took the lead and big Johnny had a tough time keeping up. He didn't complain, didn't seem to be breathing too hard; he just kept coming on, stopping every now and then to wait for the pup to catch up, and breaking every hour for a rest.

The country had gotten bleaker as it rose. As long as we'd been among the trees, there had been an illusion of familiarity; not cosy, but at least there was life, almost Earth-type life. You could fool yourself that somewhere over the next rise there might be a house, or a road. But not here. There was just the snowfield, as alien as Jupiter, with the long shadows of the western peaks falling across it. And ahead the glacier towering

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over us against the dark sky, sugar white in the late sun, deep-sea blue in the shadows.

About the third hour, the big man pointed something out to me, far back along the trail. It looked like a scatter of black pepper against the white.

"The scorpion pack," he said.

I grunted. "We won't outrun them standing here."

"In their own time they will close the gap," he said.

We did nine hours' hike, up one ridge, down the far side, up another, higher one, before he called a halt. Dusk was coming on when we made our camp in the lee of an ice buttress, if you can call a couple of hollows in the frozen snow a camp. The big man got a small fire going, and boiled some soup. He gave me my usual hearty serving, but it seemed to me he shorted himself and the dog a little.

"How are the supplies holding out?" I asked him.

"Well enough," was all he said.

The temperature was down to minus 9 degrees Centigrade now. He unpacked his cloak, a black- and orange-striped super-sheepskin the size of a mains'l, and wrapped himself up in it. He and the dog slept together, curled up for warmth. I turned down the invitation to join them.

"My circulation's good," I said. "Don't worry about me."

But in spite of the suit, I woke up shivering and had to set the thermostat a few notches higher. Big Boy didn't seem to mind the cold. But then, an animal his size had an advantage. He had less radiating surface per unit weight. It wasn't freezing that would get him—not unless things got a lot worse.

When he woke me, it was deep twilight; the sun was gone behind the peaks to the west. The route ahead led up the side of a thirty-degree snow slope. There were enough outcroppings of rock and tumbled ice blocks to make progress possible, but it was slow going. The pack on our trail had closed the gap while we slept; I estimated they were ten miles behind now. There were about twenty-five of the things, strung out in a wide crescent. I didn't like that; it suggested more intelligence than I'd expected for the ugly creatures. Woola rolled her eyes and showed her teeth and whined, looking back at them. The giant just kept moving forward, slow and steady.

"How about it?" I asked him at the next break. "Do we just let them pick the spot? Or do we fort up somewhere, where they can only jump us from about three and a half sides?"

"They must come to us."

I looked back down the slope we had been climbing steadily for more hours than I could keep track of, trying to judge their distance.

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"Not more than five miles," I said. "They could have closed anytime in the last couple of hours. What are they waiting for?"

He glanced up at the high ridge, dazzling two miles above. "Up there, the air is thin and cold. They sense that we will weaken."

"A stiff upper lip is nifty—but don't let it go to your head. How about setting up an ambush up there?" I pointed out a jumble of rock slabs a hundred yards above.

"They will not enter it."

"OK," I said. "You're the wily native guide. I'm just a tourist. We'll play it your way. But what do we do when it gets dark?"

"The moon will soon rise."

In the next two hours we covered about three quarters of a mile. The slope was close to forty-five degrees now. Powdery snow went cascading down in slow plumes with every step. Without the suit, I don't know if I could have stayed with it, even with the low gravity. Big Johnny was using his hands a lot now, and the dog's puffing was piteous to hear.

"How old is the mutt?" I asked when we were lying on our backs at the next break, with my trailmates working hard to get some nourishment out of what to them was some very thin atmosphere, and me faking the same distress, while I breathed the rich mixture from my suit collector.

"Three years."

"That would be about thirty-five standard. How long—" I remembered my panting and did some, "—do they live?"

"No one . . . knows."

"What does that mean?"

"Her kind . . . die in battle."

"It looks like she'll get her chance."

"For that . . . she is grateful."

"She looks scared to death," I said. "And dead beat."

"Weary, yes. But fear is not . . . bred in her."

We made another half mile before the pack decided the time had come to move in to the attack.

The dog knew it first; she gave a bellow like a gut-shot elephant and took a twenty-foot bound downslope to take up her stand between us and them. It couldn't have been a worse position from the defensive viewpoint, with the exception of the single factor of our holding the high ground. It was a featureless stretch of frozen snow, tilted on edge, naked as a tin roof. The big fellow used his number forty's to stamp out a hollow, working in a circle to widen it.

"You damn fool, you ought to be building a mound," I yelled at him. "That's a cold grave you're digging."

"Do as I do . . . Carl Patton," he panted. "For your life."

"Thanks; I'll stay topside." I picked a spot off to his left and kicked some ice chunks into a

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heap to give me a firing platform. I made a big show of checking the slug thrower, then unobtrusively set the crater gun for max range, narrow beam. I don't know why I bothered playing it foxy; big boy didn't know the difference between a legal weapon and contraband. Maybe it was just the instinct to have an ace up the sleeve. By the time I finished, the pack was a quarter of a mile away and coming up fast, not running or leaping, but twinkling along on clusters of steel-rod legs that ate up the ground like a fire eats dry grass.

"Carl Patton, it would be well if you stood by my back," the big man called.

"I don't need to hide behind you," I barked.

"Listen well!" he said, and for the first time his voice lacked the easy, almost idle tone. "They cannot attack in full charge. First must they halt and raise their barb. In that moment are they vulnerable. Strike for the eye—but beware the ripping claws!"

"I'll work at a little longer range," I called back, and fired a slug at one a little in advance of the line but still a couple of hundred yards out. There was a bright flash against the ice; a near miss. The next one was dead on—a solid hit in the center of the leaf-shaped plate of tarnish-black armor that covered the thorax. He didn't even break stride.

"Strike for the eye, Carl Patton!"

"What eye?" I yelled. "All I see is plate armor and pistons!" I fired for the legs, missed, missed again, then sent fragments of a limb flying. The owner may have faltered for a couple of microseconds, or maybe I just blinked. I wasn't even sure which one I had hit. They came on, closing ranks now, looking suddenly bigger and more deadly, like an assault wave of light armor, barbed and spiked and invulnerable, with nothing to stop them but a man with a stick, a worn out old hound, and me with my popgun. I felt the weapon bucking in my hand and realized I had been firing steadily. I took a step back, dropped the slug thrower and palmed the crater gun as the line reached the spot where Woola crouched, paralyzed.

But instead of slamming into the big dog at full bore, the pair facing her skidded to a dead stop, executed a swift but complicated rearrangement of limbs, dropping their forward ends to the ground, bringing their hindquarters up and over, unsheathing two-foot long stingers that poised, ready to plunge down into the unprotected body of the animal. . . .

I wouldn't have believed anything so big could move so fast. She came up from her flattened position like a cricket off a hotplate, was in midair, twisting to snap down at the thing on the

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left with jaws like a bear-trap, landed sprawling, spun, leaped, snapped, and was poised, snarling, while two ruined attackers flopped and stabbed their hooks into the ice before her. I saw all this in a fast half-second while I was bringing the power gun up, squeezing the firing stud to pump a multi-megawatt jolt into the thing that was rearing up in front of me. The shock blasted a foot-wide pit in it, knocked it a yard backward, but didn't slow its strike. The barb whipped up, over and down to bury itself in the ice between my feet.

"The eye!" The big man's voice boomed at me over the snarls of Woola and the angry buzzing that was coming from the attackers. "The eye, Carl Patton!"

I saw it then: a three-inch patch like reticulated glass, deep red, set in the curve of armor above the hook-lined prow. It exploded as I fired. I swiveled left and fired again, from the corner of my eye saw the big man swing his club left, right. I was down off my mound, working my way over to him, slamming shots into whatever was closest. The scorpions were all around us, but only half a dozen at a time could crowd in close to the edge of the twelve-foot depression the giant had tramped out. One went over, pushed from behind, scrabbling for footing, and died as the club smashed down on him. I killed another and jumped down beside the giant.

"Back to back, Carl Patton," he called. A pair came up together over a barricade of dead monsters, and while they teetered for attack position, I shot them, then shot the one that mounted their threshing corpses. Then suddenly the pressure slackened, and I was hearing the big man's steam-engine puffing, the dog's rasping snarls, was aware of a pain in my thigh, of the breath burning in my throat. A scorpion jittered on his thin legs ten feet away, but he came no closer. The others were moving back, buzzing and clacking. I started up over the side, and an arm like a jib boom stopped me.

"They must . . . come to us," the giant wheezed out the words. His face was pink and he was having trouble getting enough air, but he was smiling.

"If you say so," I said.

"Your small weapon strikes a man's blow," he said, instead of commenting on my stupidity.

"What are they made of? They took my rounds like two-inch flint steel."

"They are no easy adversaries," he said. "Yet we killed nine." He looked across at where the dog stood panting, facing the enemy. "Woola slew five. They learn caution—" He broke off, looking down at me, at my leg. He went to one knee, touched a tear in my suit I hadn't noticed. That shook

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me, seeing the ripped edge of the material. Not even a needler could penetrate the stuff—but one of those barbs had.

"The hide is unbroken," he said. "Luck was with you this day, Carl Patton. The touch of the barb is death."

Something moved behind him and I yelled and fired and a scorpion came plunging down on the spot where he'd been standing an instant before. I fell and rolled, came around, put one in the eye just as Johnny Thunder's club slammed home in the same spot. I got to my feet and the rest of them were moving off, back down the slope.

"You damned fool!" I yelled at the giant. Rage broke my voice. "Why don't you watch yourself?"

"I am in your debt, Carl Patton," was all he said.

"Debt, hell! Nobody owes me anything—and that goes both ways!"

He didn't answer that, just looked down at me, breathing hard and smiling a little, like you would at an excited child. I took a couple of deep breaths of warmed and fortified tank air and felt better—but not much.

"Will you tell me your true name, small warrior?" the giant said.

I felt ice form in my chest.

"What do you mean?" I stalled.

"We have fought side by side. It is fitting that we exchange the secret names our mothers gave us at birth."

"Oh, magic, eh? Juju. The secret word of power. Skip it, big fellow. Johnny Thunder is good enough for me."

"As you will . . . Carl Patton." He went to see to the dog then, and I checked to see how badly my suit was damaged. There was a partial power loss in the leg servos and the heat was affected, too. That wasn't good. There were still a lot of miles to walk out of the giant before the job was done.

When we hit the trail half an hour later, I was still wondering why I had moved so fast to save the life of the man I'd come here to kill.

It was almost full dark when we turned in, curled up in pits trampled in the snow. Johnny Thunder said the scorpions wouldn't be back, but I sweated inside my insulated longjohns as the last of the light faded to a pitch black like the inside of an unmarked grave. Then I must have dozed off, because I woke with blue-white light in my face. The inner moon, Cronus, had risen over the ridge, a cratered disk ten degrees wide, almost full, looking close enough to jump up and bang your head on.

We made good time in the moonlight, considering the slope of the glacier's skirt we were climbing. At forty-five thousand feet,

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we topped the barrier and looked down the far side and across a shadowed valley to the next ridge, silver-white against the stars, twenty miles away.

"Perhaps on the other side we will find them," the giant said. His voice had lost some of its timbre. His face looked frost-bitten, pounded numb by the sub-zero wind. Woola crouched behind him, looking shrunken and old.

"Sure," I said. "Or maybe beyond the next one."

"It will be well if we do. Beyond lie the Towers of Nandi. If your friends have fallen there, their sleep will be long—and ours as well."

It was two marches to the next ridge. By then the moon was high enough to illuminate the whole panorama from the crest. There was nothing in sight but ice. We camped in the lee, then went on. The suit was giving me trouble, unbalanced as it was, and the toes of my right foot were feeling the frost. And in spite of the hot concentrates I sucked on the sly as I hiked, and the synthetic pep the hypospray metered into my femoral artery, I was starting to feel it now. But not as badly as Big Johnny. He had a gaunt, starved look, and he hiked as though he had anvils tied to his feet. He was still feeding himself and the dog meager rations, and forcing an equal share on me. I stuffed what I couldn't eat in the disposal and watched him starve. But he was tough; he starved slowly, grudgingly, fighting for every inch.

That night, lying back of a barrier he'd built up out of snow blocks against the wind, he asked me a question.

"What is it like, Carl Patton, to travel across the space between the worlds?"

"Solitary confinement," I told him.

"You do not love your solitude?"

"What does that matter? I do my job."

"What do you love, Carl Patton?"

"Wine, women, and song," I said. "And you can even skip the song, in a pinch."

"A woman waits for you?"

"Women," I corrected. "But they're not waiting."

"Your loves seem few, Carl Patton. What then do you hate?"

"Fools," I said.

"Is it fools who have driven you here?"

"Me? Nobody drives me anywhere. I go where I like."

"Then it is freedom you strive for. Have you found it here on my world, Carl Patton?" His face was a gaunt mask like a weathered carving, but his voice was laughing at me.

"You know you're going to die out here, don't you?" I hadn't intended to say that. But I did, and my tone was savage to my ears.

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He looked at me, the way he always did before he spoke, as if he were trying to read a message written on my face.

"A man must die," he said.

"You don't have to be here," I said. "You could break it off now, go back, forget the whole thing."

"As could you, Carl Patton."

"Me quit?" I snapped. "No thanks. My job's not done."

He nodded. "A man must do what he sets out to do. Else he is no more than a snowflake driven before the wind."

"You think this a game?" I barked. "A contest? Do or die, or maybe both, and may the best man win?"

"With whom would I contest, Carl Patton? Are we not comrades of the trail?"

"We're strangers," I said. "You don't know me and I don't know you. And you can skip trying to figure out my reasons for what I do."

"You set out to save the lives of the helpless, because it was your duty."

"It's not yours! You don't have to break yourself on these mountains! You can leave this ice factory, live the rest of your days in comfort, have everything you'd ever want—"

"What I want, no *man* can give me."

"I suppose you hate us," I said. "The strangers who came here and killed your world."

"Who can hate a natural force?"

"All right—what *do* you hate?"

For a minute I thought he wasn't going to answer. "I hate the coward within me," he said. "The voice that whispers counsels of surrender. But if I fled, and saved this flesh, what spirit would then live on to light it?"

"You want to run—then run!" I almost yelled. "You're going to lose this race, big man! Quit while you can!"

"I will go on—while I can. If I am lucky, the flesh will die before the spirit."

"Spirit, hell! You're a suicidal maniac!"

"Then am I in good company, Carl Patton?"

I let him take that one.

We passed the hundred mile mark the next march. We crossed another ridge, higher than the last. The cold was sub-arctic, the wind a flaying knife. The moon set, and the dawn came. My locator told me when we passed within ten miles of the pod. All its systems were still operating. The power cells were good for a hundred years. If I slipped up at my end, the frozen miners might wake up to a new century, but they'd wake up.

Johnny Thunder was a pitiful sight now. His hands were split and bloody from the bitter cold, his hollow cheeks and bloodless lips cracked and peeling from

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frostbite, the hide stretched tight over his bones. He moved slowly, heavily, wrapped in his furs. But he moved. I ranged out ahead, keeping the pressure on. The dog was in even worse shape than his master. He trailed far behind on the upslopes, spent most of each break catching up. Little by little, in spite of my heckling, the breaks got longer, the marches shorter. It was late afternoon again when we reached the high pass that the big man said led into the badlands he called the Towers of Nandi. I came up the last stretch of trail between sheer ice walls and looked out over a vista of ice peaks sharp as broken bottles, packed together like shark's teeth, rising up and up in successive ranks that reached as far as the eye could see.

I turned to urge the giant to waste some more strength hurrying to close the gap, but he beat me to it. He was pointing, shouting something I couldn't hear for a low rumble that had started up. I looked up, and the whole side of the mountain was coming down on me.

The floor was cold. It was the tiled floor of the creche locker room, dnd I was ten years old, and lying on my face, held there by the weight of a kid called Soup, age fourteen, with the physique of an ape and an IQ to match.

When he'd first pushed me back against the wall, knocked aside my punches, and thrown me to the floor, I had cried, called for help to the ring of eager-eyed spectators, most of whom had more than once felt the weight of Soup's knobby knuckles. None of them moved. When he'd bounced my head on the floor and called on me to say uncle, I opened my mouth to say it, and then spat in his face instead. What little restraint Soup had left him then. Now his red-bristled forearm was locked under my jaw, and his knee was in the small of my back, and I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Soup was a boy who didn't know his own strength, who would stretch his growing muscles with all the force he could muster, caught up and carried away in the thrill of the discovery of his own animal power—would bend my back until my spine snapped, and I'd be dead, dead, dead, at the hands of a moron. . . .

Unless I saved myself. I was smarter than Soup—smarter than any of them. He couldn't—couldn't kill me. Not if I used my brain, instead of wasting my strength against an animal body twice the size of my own.

I stepped outside my body and looked at myself, saw how he knelt on me, gripping his own wrist, balancing with one outflung foot. I saw how, by twisting to my right side, I could slide out from under the knee, and then, with a sudden movement. . . .

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His knee slipped off-center as I moved under him. With all the power in me, I drew up my legs. Unbalanced, he started to topple to his right, still gripping me. I threw myself back against him, which brought my head under his chin. I reached up and back, took a double handful of coarse red hair, and ripped with all my strength.

He screamed, and his grip was gone. I twisted like an eel as he grabbed for my hands, still tangled in his hair; I lunged and buried my teeth in his thick ear. He howled and tried to tear away, and I felt the cartilage break, tasted salty blood. He ripped my hands away, taking hair and a patch of scalp with them. I saw his face, contorted like a demon-mask as he sprawled away from me, still grasping my wrists. I brought my knee up into his crotch and saw his face turn to green clay. I jumped to my feet; he writhed, coiled, making an ugly choking sound. I took aim and kicked him hard in the mouth. I landed two more carefully placed kicks; with my full weight behind them, before the rudimentary judgment of the audience awoke and they pulled me away. . . .

There was movement near me. I heard the rasp of something hard and rough against another hardness. Light appeared. I drew a breath and saw the white-bearded face of an ancient man looking down at me from far above, from the top of a deep well. . . .

"You still live, Carl Patton," the giant's voice seemed to echo from a long way off. I saw his big hands come down, straining at a slab of ice, saw him lift it slowly, toss it aside. There was snow in his hair, ice droplets in his beard. His breath was frost.

"Get out of here," I forced the words out past the broken glass in my chest. "Before the rest comes down."

He didn't answer; he lifted another slab, and my arms were free. I tried to help, but that just made more snow spill down around my shoulders. He put his big impossible hands under my arms and lifted, dragged me up and out of my grave. I lay on my back and he sprawled beside me. The dog Woola crawled up to him, making anxious noises. Little streamers of snow were coming down from above, being whipped away by the wind. A mass of ice the size of a carrier tender hung unsupported a few hundred feet above.

"Run, you damned fool!" I yelled. It came out as a whisper. He got to his knees, slowly. He scooped me up, rose to his feet. Ice fragments clattered down from above. He took a step forward, toward the badlands.

"Go back," I managed. "You'll be trapped on the far side!"

He halted, as more ice rattled

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down. "Alone, Carl Patton . . . would you turn back?"

"No," I said. "But there's no reason . . . now . . . for you to die . . ."

"Then we will go on." He took another step and staggered as a piece of ice the size of a basketball struck him a glancing blow on the shoulder. The dog snarled at his side. It was coming down around us like rice at a wedding now. He went on, staggering up over the final drift. There was a cannon-boom from above; air whistled past us, moving out. He made three more paces and went down, dropped me, knelt over me like a shaggy tent. I heard him grunt as the ice fragments struck him. Somewhere behind us there was a smash like a breaking dam. The air was full of snow, blinding, choking. The light faded. . . .

The dead were crying. It was a sad, lost sound, full of mournful surprise that life had been so short and so full of mistakes. I understood how they felt. Why shouldn't I? I was one of them.

But corpses didn't have headaches, as well as I could remember. Or cold feet, or weights that crushed them against sharp rocks. Not unless the stories about where the bad ones went were true. I opened my eyes to take a look at hell, and saw the hound. She whined again, and I got my head around and saw an arm bigger than my leg. The weight I felt was what was left of Johnny Thunder, sprawled across me, under a blanket of broken ice.

It took me half an hour to work my way free. The suit was what had saved me, of course, with its automatic defensive armor. I was bruised, and one or two ribs were broken, but there was nothing I couldn't live with until I got back to base and my million credits.

Because the job was done. The giant didn't move while I was digging it out, didn't stir when I thumbed up his eyelid. He still had some pulse, but it wouldn't last long. He had been bleeding from ice wounds on his face and hands, but the blood had frozen. But what the pounding hadn't finished the cold would. And even if he came around, the wall of ice behind him closed the pass like a vault door. When the sob sisters arrived to check on their oversized pet, they'd find him here, just as I described him, the noble victim of the weather and the piece of bad luck that had made us miss our target by a tragic ten miles, after that long, long hike. They'd have a good syndicated cry over how he'd given his all, and then they'd close the book on another footnote to history.

Not that I got any big kick out of having proved my cleverness once again. Just a matter of analyzing the data and then using it.

"So long, Johnny Thunder," I said. "You were a lot of man."

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The dog lifted his head and whined. I switched on the lift-unit built into my suit and headed for the pod, fifteen miles away.

The twenty-foot long pod was nestled in a drift of hard-packed snow, in a little hollow among barren rock-peaks, apparently intact. I wasn't surprised; the auto gear I had installed could have soft-landed a china shop without cracking a teacup. I had contracted to deliver my load intact, and it was a point of pride with me to fulfill the letter of a deal. I was so busy congratulating myself on that score, that I was fifty feet from the pod before I noticed that the snow had been disturbed around it, trampled maybe, then brushed out to conceal the tracks. By then it was too late to become invisible; if there was anybody around, they had already seen me. I stopped ten feet from the entry hatch and went through the motions of collapsing in a pitiful little heap, all tuckered out from my exertions, meanwhile looking around, over, and under the pod. I didn't see anything.

I lay where I was long enough for anybody who wanted to come out to make his entrance. No takers. That left the play up to me. I made a production out of getting my feet under me and staggering to the entry hatch. The scratches there told me that part of the story. The port mechanism was still intact. It opened on command and I crawled into the lock. Inside, everything looked normal. The icebox seal was tight, the dials said the cooler units were operating perfectly. I almost let it go at that, but not quite. I don't know why, except that a lifetime of painful lessons had taught me to take nothing for granted. It took me half an hour to get the covers off the reefer controls. When I did, I saw it right away: a solenoid hung in the half-open position. It was the kind of minor malfunction you might expect after a hard landing—but not if you knew what I knew. It had been jimmied, the support bent a fractional millimeter out of line, just enough to jam the action—and incidentally to actuate the heating cycle that would thaw the ten men inside the cold room in ten hours flat. I freed it, heard gas hiss into the lines, then cracked the vault door and checked visually. The inside gauge read plus 3 degrees absolute. The temperature hadn't had time to start rising yet; the ten long boxes and their contents were still intact. That meant the tampering had been done recently. I was still mulling over the implications of that deduction when I heard the crunch of feet on the ice outside the open lock.

Illini looked different than he had when I had seen him last,

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back in the plush bureaucratic setting of League Central. His monkey face behind the cold mask looked pinched and bloodless; his long nose was blue with cold, his jaw a scruffy unshaven blue. He didn't seem surprised to see me. He stepped up through the hatch and a second man followed him. They looked around, took in the open panel, the marks in the frost crust around the reefer, held on the open panel.

"Everything all right here?" the little man asked me. He made it casual, as if we'd just happened to meet on the street.

"Almost," I said. "A little trouble with a solenoid. Nothing serious."

Illini nodded as if that was par for the course. His eyes flicked over me. "Outside, you seemed to be in difficulty," he said. "I see you've made a quick recovery."

"It must have been psychosomatic," I said. "Getting inside took my mind off it."

"I take it the subject is dead?"

"Hell, no," I said. "He's alive and well in Phoenix, Arizona. How did you find the pod, Illini?"

"I was lucky enough to persuade the black marketeer who supplied your homing equipment to sell me its twin, tuned to the same code." He looked mildly amused. "Don't be too distressed, Ulrik. There are very few secrets from an unlimited budget."

"One is enough," I said. "Played right. But you hired me to do a job. Following me here may have jinxed it."

"Your scheme was good enough," Illini said judiciously. "To walk the subject to death on his own turf. Poetic. And the use of the sick men . . ." he nodded toward the vault. "Clever. Somewhat overdevious, perhaps—but clever. Up to a point. It was apparent from the special equipment you installed in the pod that you had some idea of your cargo surviving the affair."

"So?"

"You were instructed to rid us of the subject in a way that would be above any possible suspicion, at the same time leaving the public with a tidy image to treasure. Well and good. But the death of the freak in a misguided attempt to rescue men who were never in danger would smack of the comic. People might be dissatisfied. They might begin investigating the circumstances which allowed their pet to waste himself. But if it appears he *might* have saved the men—then the public will accept his martyrdom."

"You plan to spend ten men on the strength of that theory?"

"A trivial price to pay for extra insurance."

"How will you square your being here? The Monitor Service won't like that."

Illini gave me his I-just-ate-the-canary look. "I'm here quite legal-

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ly. By great good fortune, my yacht happened to be cruising in the vicinity and picked up your U-beam. Ring Station accepted my offer of assistance."

"I see. And what have you got in mind for me?"

"Just what was agreed on, of course. I have no intention of complicating the situation at this point. We'll proceed with your plan precisely as conceived—with the single exception I've noted. I can rely on your discretion, for obvious reasons. Your fee is already on deposit at Credit Central."

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you? But you overlooked one thing: I'm temperamental. I don't like people making changes in my plans."

Illini lifted a lip. "I'm aware of your penchant for salving your conscience as a professional assassin by your nicety in other matters. But in this case I'm afraid my desires must prevail." The hand of the man behind him strayed casually to the gun at his hip. So far, he hadn't said a word. He didn't have to. He'd be a good man with a sidearm. Illini wouldn't have brought anything but the best. Or maybe the second best. It was a point I'd probably have to check soon.

"Our work here will require only a few hours," Illini said. "After that . . ." he made an expansive gesture. "We're all free to take up other matters." He smiled as though everything had been cleared up. "By the way, where is the body? I'll want to view it, just as a matter of routine."

I folded my arms and leaned against the bulkhead. I did it carefully, just in case I was wrong about a few things. "What if I don't feel like telling you?"

"In that case, I'd be forced to insist." Illini's eyes were wary. The gunsel had tensed.

"Uh-uh," I said. "This is a delicate setup. A charred corpse wouldn't help the picture."

"Podnac's instructions are to disable, not kill."

"For a public servant doing his job, you seem to be taking a lot of chances, Illini. It couldn't be that the selfless motives the Commissioner told me about are marred by some private considerations, I suppose?"

Illini lifted his shoulders, smiling faintly. "It seems there are laticite deposits," he said. "I own an interest in the exploitation contract, yes. But someone was bound to profit. Why not those who made it possible?"

"That's another one on me," I said. "I should have held out for a percentage."

"That's enough gossip," Illini said. "Don't try to stall me, Ulrik. Speak up or suffer the consequences."

I shook my head. "I'm calling your bluff, Illini. The whole thing

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is balanced on a knife-edge. Any sign of trouble here—even a grease spot on the deck—and the whole thing is blown."

Podnac made a quick move and his gun was in his hand. I grinned at it. "That's supposed to scare me so I go outside where you can work a little better, eh?"

"I'm warning you, Ulrik—"

"Skip it. I'm not going anywhere. But you're leaving, Illini. You've got your boat parked somewhere near here. Get in it and lift off. I'll take it from there."

"You fool! You'd risk the entire operation for the sake of a piece of mawkish sentiment?"

"It's my operation, Illini. I'll play it out my way or not at all. I'm like that. That's why you hired me, remember?"

He drew a breath like a man getting ready for a deep dive, snorted it out. "You don't have a chance, Ulrik! You're throwing everything away—for what?"

"Not everything. You'll still pay off for a finished job. It's up to you. You can report you checked the pod and found everything normal. Try anything else and the bubble pops."

"There are two of us. We could take you barehanded."

"Not while I've got my hand on the gun under my arm."

The little man's eyes ate me raw. He made a face like a man chewing glass and jerked his head at his hired hand. They walked sideways to the hatch and jumped down. I watched them back away.

"I'll get you for this," Illini told me. "I promise you that."

"No you won't," I said. "You'll just count those millions and keep your mouth shut. That's the way the Commissioner would like it."

They turned and I straightened and dropped my hands, and Podnac spun and fired, and the impact knocked me backward twenty feet across the hold.

The world was full of roaring lights and blazing sounds, but I held on to a slender thread of consciousness, built it into a rope, crawled back up it. I did it because I had to. I made it just in time. Podnac was coming through the hatch, Illini's voice yapping behind him. I covered him and pressed the stud and blew him back out of sight.

I was numb all over, like a thumb that's just been hit by a hammer. Hot fluid was trickling down the inside of my suit; broken bones grated when I moved. I knew then: this was one scrape I wouldn't get out of. I'd had it. Illini had won.

His voice jarred me out of a daze.

"He fired against my order, Ulrik! You heard me tell him! I'm not responsible!"

I blinked a few times and could see the little man through

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the open port, standing in a half crouch on the spot where I'd last seen him, watching the dark hatchway for the flash that would finish him. He didn't know how hard I'd been hit, that he could have strolled in and finished the job with no opposition. He thought tough, smart Baird Ulrik had rolled with another punch, was holding on him now, cool and deadly, in charge of everything.

OK. I'd do my best to keep him thinking that. I was done for, but so was he—if I could con him into leaving now. When the Monitors showed up and found my corpse and the note I'd manage to write before the final night closed down, Illini and Company would be out of the planet-stealing business and into a penal colony before you could say malfeasance-in-high-office. I looked around for my voice, breathed on it a little, and called:

"We won't count that one, Illini. Take your boy and lift off. I'll be watching. So will the Monitor scopes. If you try to land again, you'll have them to explain to."

"I'll do as you say, Ulrik. It's your show. I . . . I'll have to use a lift harness on Podnac."

I didn't answer that one. I couldn't. That worried Illini.

"Ulrik? I'm going to report that I found everything in order. Don't do anything foolish. Remember your million credits."

"Get going," I managed. I watched him back off a few steps, then turn and scramble up the slope. The lights kept fading and coming up again.

Quite suddenly Illini was there again, guiding the slack body of his protege as it hung in the harness. When I looked again they were gone. Then I let go of whatever it was I had been hanging onto, and went spinning off into the bottomless darkness. . . .

When I woke up, Johnny Thunder was sitting beside me.

He gave me water. I drank it and said, "You big, dumb ox! What are you doing here?" I said that, but all that came out was a dry wheeze, like a collapsing lung. I lay with my head propped against the wall the way he had laid me out, and looked at the big, gaunt face, the cracked and peeling lips, the matted hair caked with ice, the bright blue eyes fixed on mine.

"I woke and found you had gone, Carl Patton." His voice had lost its resonance. He sounded like an old man. "Woola led me here."

I thought that over—and then I saw it. It almost made me grin. A note written in blood might poke a hole in Illini's plans—but a live giant would sink them with all hands.

I made another try and managed a passable whisper: "Listen to me, Johnny. Listen hard, because once is all you're likely to

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get it. This whole thing was a fix—a trick to get you dead. This planet is lousy with minerals, worth millions. Billions. But . . . League law . . . they couldn't touch it as long as one giant was alive. The men here were never in danger. At least they weren't meant to be. But there was a change in plan. But that's only after you're taken care of. And if you're alive . . ." It was getting too complicated.

"Never mind that," I said. "You outsmarted 'em. Outsmarted all of us. You're alive after all. Now the trick is to stay that way. So you lie low. There's heat and emergency food stores here, all you need until pickup. And then you'll have it made. There was a jammed solenoid, you understand? You know what a solenoid looks like? And you freed it. You saved the men. You'll be a hero. They won't dare touch you then . . ."

"You are badly hurt, Carl Patton—"

"My name's not Carl Patton, damn you! It's Ulrik! I'm a hired killer, understand? I came here to kill you—"

"You have lost much blood, Ulrik," he said softly. "Are there medical supplies here?"

"Nothing that will help me. I took a power gun blast. My left hip is nothing but bone splinters and hamburger. The suit helped me some—but not enough. But forget that. What's important is that they don't know you're alive! If they sneak back for another look and discover that—before the relief crew gets here—then they win. And they can't win, understand? I won't let 'em!"

"At my house there is a medical machine. The doctors placed it there, after the Sickness. It can heal you."

"Sure—and at Med Center they'd have me dancing the Somali in thirty-six hours. And if I'd stayed away, I wouldn't have been in this fix at all. Forget all that and concentrate on staying alive . . ."

I must have faded out then, because the next I knew someone was sticking dull knives in my side. I got my eyelids up and saw my suit open and lots of blood. Big Johnny was doing things to my leg. I told him to leave me alone, but he went on sawing at me with red-hot saws, pouring acid into the wounds. And then after a while I was coming up from a long way down, looking at my leg, bandaged to the hip with tape from the first aid locker.

"You have much strength left, Ulrik," he said. "You fought me like the frost-demon."

I wanted to tell him to let it alone, let me die in peace, but no sound came out. The giant was on his feet, wrapped in the purple and green fur. He picked me up, turned to the port. I tried again to yell, to tell him that the play now

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was to salvage the only thing that was left; revenge. That he'd had his turn at playing St. Bernard to the rescue, that another hopeless walk in the snow would only mean that Illini and Company won after all, that my bluff had been for nothing. But it was no use. I felt him stagger as the wind hit him, heard my suit thermostat click on. Then the cotton-wool blanket closed over me.

I don't remember much about the trip back. The suit's metabolic monitor kept me doped—that, and nature's defenses against the sensation of being carried over a shoulder through a blizzard, while the bone chips suppurated and began working their way through the crushed flesh of my thigh. Once I looked into the big, frost-scarred face, met the pain-dulled eyes.

"Leave me here," I said. "I don't want help. Not from you, not from anybody. I win or lose on my own."

He shook his head.

"Why?" I said. "Why are you doing it?"

"A man," he said. "A man . . . must do . . . what he sets out to do."

He went on. He was a corpse, but he wouldn't lie down and die.

I ate and drank from the tubes in my mouth from reflex. If I'd been fully awake I'd have starved myself to shorten the ordeal. Sometimes I was conscious for a half an hour at a stretch, knowing how a quarter of beef felt on the butcher's hook; and other times I slept and dreamed I had passed the entrance exams for hell. A few times I was aware of falling, of lying in the snow, and then of big hands that painfully lifted, grunting, of the big, tortured body plodding on.

Then there was another fall, somehow more final than the others. For a long time I lay where I was, waiting to die. And after a while it got through to me that the suit wouldn't let me go as easily as that. The food and the auto-drugs that would keep a healthy man healthy for a year would keep a dying man in torture for almost as long. I was stuck on this side of the river, like it or not. I opened my eyes to tell the giant what I thought of that, and saw his house, looming tall against the big trees a hundred yards away.

I covered the distance a hundred miles at a time, over a blanket of broken bottles. The door resisted for a while, but in the end I got my weight against it, and it swung in and dumped me on the plank floor. After that there was another long, fuzzy time while I clawed my way to the oversized med cabinet, got it opened, and fell inside. I heard the diagnostic unit start up, felt the sensors moving over me. Then I didn't know any more for a long time.

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This time I came out of it clear-headed, hungry, pain-free, and with a walking cast on my leg. I looked around for my host, but I was all alone in the big lodge. There was no cheery blaze on the hearth, but the house was as warm as toast. At some time in the past, the do-gooders had installed a space heater with automatic controls to keep the giant cosy if the fire went out. I found some food on the shelves and tried out my jaws for the first time in many days. It was painful, but satisfying. I fired up the comm rig and got ready to tell the Universe my story, and then I remembered there were still a few details to clear up. I went to the door with a vague idea of seeing if Johnny Thunder was outside, chopping wood for exercise. All I saw was a stretch of wind-packed snow, the backdrop of giant trees, the gray sky hanging low overhead like wet canvas. And one other thing: an oblong drift of snow, halfway between me and the forest wall.

The sound of snow crust crunching under my feet was almost explosively loud in the stillness as I walked across to the long mound. He lay on his back, his eyes open to the sky, glazed over with ice. His arms were bent at the elbow, the hands open as if he were carrying a baby. The snow was drifted over him, like a blanket to warm him in his sleep. The dog was beside him, frozen at her post of duty.

I looked at the giant for a long time, and words stirred inside of me, things that needed a voice to carry them across the gulf wider than space to where he had gone. But all I said was: "You made it, Johnny. We were the smart ones; but you were the one that did what you set out to do."

I flipped up the SEND key, ready to fire the blast that would sink Illini and crew like a lead canoe, but then the small, wise voice of discretion started whispering to me. Nailing them would have been a swell gesture for me to perform as a corpse, frozen with a leer of triumph on my face, thumbing my nose from the grave. I might even have had a case for blowing them sky-high to save Johnny Thunder's frozen paradise for him, in view of the double-cross they'd tried on me.

But I was alive, and Johnny was dead. And that million was still waiting. There was nothing back at the pod that couldn't be explained in terms of the big bad scorpion that had chewed my leg. Johnny would be a hero, and they'd put up a marker for him on some spot the excavating rigs didn't chew up—I'd see to that.

In the end I did the smart thing; the shrewd thing. I told them what they wanted to hear; that the men were safe, and that

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the giant had died a hero like a giant should. Then I settled down to wait for the relief boat.

I collected. Since then I've been semi-retired. That's a nice way of saying that I haven't admitted to myself that I'm not taking any more assignments. I've spent my time for the past year traveling, seeing the sights, trying out the luxury spots, using up a part of the income on the pile I've stashed away. I've eaten and drunk and wenched and sampled all the kicks from air-skiing to deep-sea walking, but whatever it is I'm looking for, I have a hunch I won't find it, any more than the rest of the drones and thrill-seekers will.

It's a big, impersonal Universe, and little men crave the thing that will give them stature against the loom of stars.

But in a world where once there was a giant, the rest of us are forever pygmies.

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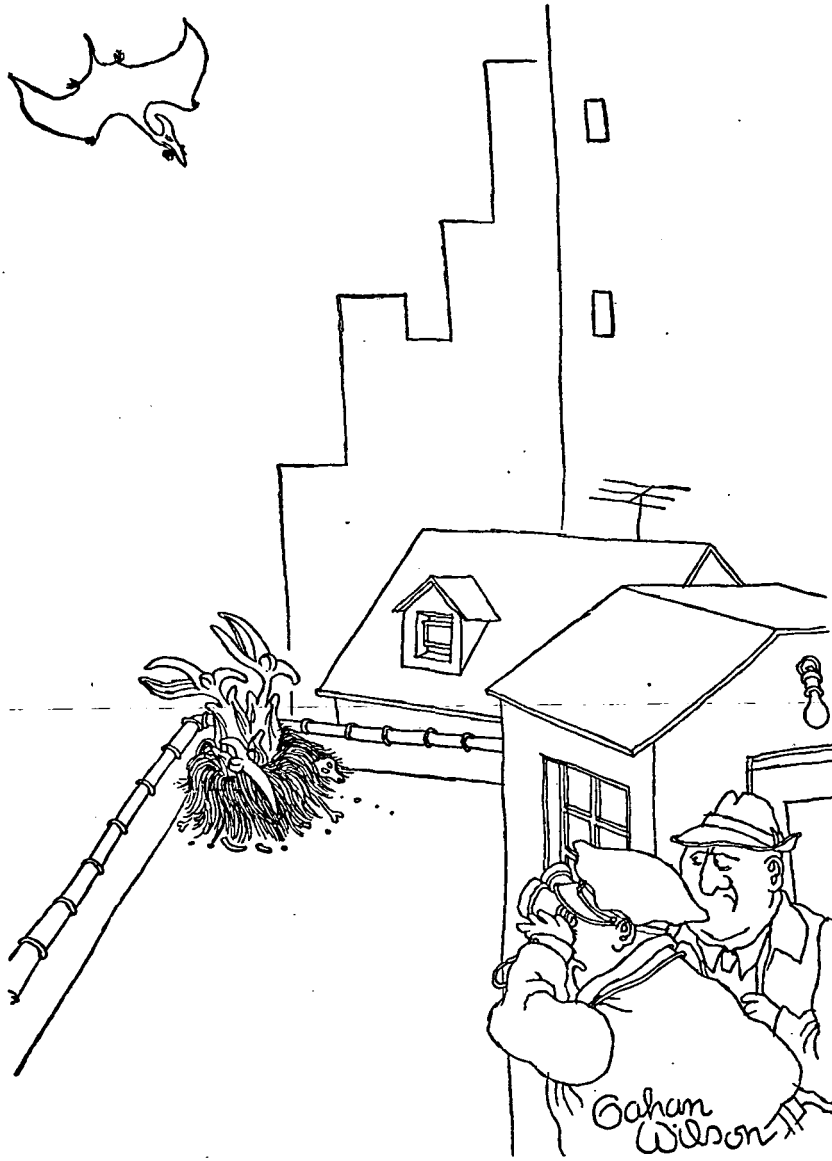

"Here she comes again, and she's got another poodle!"

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BOOKS

THE EXTREMES OF REACTION to the film version of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* have stimulated more productive argument and evocative discussion in the last few months than I can recall hearing, in and around sf circles, since the "New Thing" battle congealed on either side of a NCZ (No Communication Zone) last year. A good part of the confusion and debate has stemmed, I think, from viewers' preconceptions: one disgruntled long-time sf reader, in any case, concluded a hot hour with me by saying, "All right, you admit it's a lousy science fiction movie, and I'll go see it again and decide if it really is a great film."

The appearance of the book version—happily *after* the debut of the film—tends to confirm this view. The original screenplay was clearly a landmark in the history of both cinematic conceptualizing and collaborative effectiveness. One feels that the unique impact of the film could not have been achieved (this first time—though others may *now*, the way having been shown, be able to duplicate or even improve on it) by any other conceivable combination of co-authors; but much of the essential brilliance of the film lies in its intrinsic *cinematic* quality: it is not a filmic translation of a literary work, but a direct outgrowth of a filmic conception.

Kubrick's genius, controlling that growth, created a masterpiece. Clarke's attempt at translation of the basic collaboration into literary terms was stymied from the start: there was no way to turn the cinematic seed into a healthy literary plant.

An honest hack 'novelizer' could have made an honest banal story out of the central plotty sequence, with perhaps a one-page prologue conveying the mood of the first forty minutes of film, the climax at Keir's victory over the Mad Machine, and a purple page or three as epilogue. (The 'trip', by the way, was not as pure-Kubrick as many people seem to think—at least not judging by Clarke's literary counterpart, probably the best section in the book and the only one that, for me, evoked the Clarke-thrill of CHILD-

* *Novel by Arthur C. Clarke based on the screenplay by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke; New American Library, $4.95*

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HOOD'S END.) Alternatively, a Disch or Ballard or Harry Matthews, perhaps, might have created an abstract/surreal/literary composition out of the film's multiplex components . . .

The fact is, great scientists are very rarely good pop-science writers: one could hardly expect Clarke to sustain either the perspective or the disinterest required for (either) a literary artwork or a conventional novel derived from the film he co-fathered.

PS: If you are one of those who really wants to be *told* what the end of the movie 'meant', I'd guess the paperback will be out soon—perhaps by the time you read this.

Leave your preconceptions behind, again, when you open Samuel Delany's new NOVA (Doubleday, $4.95). My own problem was the opposite of my friend's with 2001: I came to this book with an anticipation keener than any I have brought to anything since—well, probably Vonnegut's ROSEWATER—looking for (at least an approach to) the Great Novel I (still) expect from the author of EMPIRE STAR, BABEL-17, THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION, "The Star-Pit," "Aye and Gomorrah," and (now) NOVA: and what I got instead was a first-rate jim-dandy solid provocative science-fiction novel.

It took me a while to realize I had no honest cause for complaint —a while longer to discover I damn well *did* have cause—longer yet to understand (first) why I was so irritated, and (eventually) the *real* reasons to be annoyed with the book.

Delany is in an almost unique position in sf today: everybody loves him. The 'solid core', the casual readers, the literary dippers-in, the 'new thing' crowd—Delany is all things to all readers. It is an untenable position—unless, of course, he gets as good as I think he will eventually be. Swift, Melville, Carroll, Twain, Conrad are all read by children as well as litterateurs, their plots are reducible to comic book format, while their themes are subtle and complex enough to sustain reading after delighted analytical reading. Well, Delany is not Swift or Conrad—yet; but his seven previous novels and scattered shorter works have already placed him out of the judging in the transient-writer class; and as the work of an apprentice-great, NOVA must be regarded as more of a fascinating exercise than a satisfactory achievement. *But*—

What is wrong with the book is simply that the author tried to do —not *too much,* but *enough*: he tried to write a modern novel on all the levels required (by the same standards I am applying) of a contemporary work: if he did not *quite* succeed, it is well to

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remember that neither has anyone else—yet; and few other attempts have managed to stand up meanwhile as, at least, solid entertainment.

Here is what I wrote after my first reading of the book:

NOVA is a deceptive book in several ways. Don't let the first page stop you; the book is *not*—except superficially—a *Planet Stories* superficiality. And don't rush in to identify with anyone too soon; it may take a while to decide whose viewpoint you are using.

The protagonist, the hero, and the viewpoint character are (in order of appearance, not necessarily identity) a 19-year-old gypsy-born spacehand-and-minstrel named the Mouse; a cosmically wealthy and powerful space captain named Lorq Von Ray; and a wandering scholar and spacehand called Katin.

The book is intriguingly, but unnecessarily, complex—mostly written underwater, as it were; that is, under the surface of a (too) familiar space adventure plot, aswarm and sparkling with the strange and rich biota of Delany's inner world.

There is, for instance, the Mouse's 'sensory-syrynx', an instrument which can produce a complete multi-media show—visual, musical, and olfactory display; a recurrent theme involving Tarot lore; a carefully constructed cultural context in which the 20th century serves as the classical period of a culture 1000 years older, whose technological and philosophic beginnings are rooted in the transitions of today. There are the Illyrion furnaces which have made whole planets habitable and space traversable, great glowing pits called *Hell* here, and *Gold* there—and tiny battery power packs primed by micrograms of the same stuff, which run the wondrous syrynx and Katin's tiny recorder. There is a gorgeous physiological / astrophysical / political philosophic construct in parallels; and a sweep of action from Athens to the Pleiades, with fiery fights, drinking bouts, mosques and museums, diver-hunters and cyborg-spacemen—and with all this, the book is somehow lacking. I do not know what it lacks; perhaps if it had come after EMPIRE STAR and BABEL-17, and before THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION, I should have found no lack at all. But, just as I went on from the first banal page, simply because it was Delany, and I could be sure of finding the richness and excitement I did find, so I went on from history lesson to battle scene to gorgeous syrynx session to Tarot lore, hoping I could be equally sure of learning why they were all there together. I think an explanation was given to me in the last

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pages—and I do not think it satisfied me. But never mind: the fans will love it.

That was the first time around; I have now read the book—to be precise—two and a half times (the third time, only those passages marked the second time for re-examination), and when I started to retype that earlier comment, I thought the word *unnecessarily* must have been a typographical error. Alas, not so: the error was not mechanical, but (doubly) human—the reader's and writer's both.

There is nothing in this book that did not *have* to be there—from the blind drunk of the spacebars to the wicked gorgeous princess, Ruby Red; from the syntax-inversion of the Pleiades speech-pattern to Katin's erudite lectures; from the cool halls of the Alkane Institute to the hole in the stellar doughnut. The problem is rather that some elements are so compressed as to be almost invisible, and I question whether any reader who lacks the responsibility of recording his opinion will work as hard as I did to find, and put together, all the pieces in a book so readily readable and pleasingly paced on the surface that there is no real cause to wonder how deep the channels underneath may flow—and small sign of their turbulence.

These are (at least some of) the ways you can read NOVA: as a fast-action farflung interstellar adventure; as archetypal mystical/mythical allegory (in which the Tarot and the Grail both figure prominently); as modern-myth told in the sf idiom with powerful symbols built on solid science fiction cliches; as a futuristic vehicle for a philosophic complex of political/historical/economic/sociological ideas; as an experimental approach to literary criticism.

Among other things, the book examines: the nature and value of scholarship, mysticism, 'progress', and the varieties of the creative experience; the significance of the 'instinct for workmanship' (the quote is from Veblen, not Delany) and the alienation phenomena of the industrial and (current) electronic revolutions; the relationships between the psychophysiology of the individual and the ecology of the body politic. Each of the three central characters (or the three aspects of *the* character?) suffers a variant form of alienation, rooted in different combinations of social, economic, geophysical, cultural, intellectual, and physiological factors. Through one or another of these viewpoints, the reader observes, recollects, or participates in a range of personal human experience including violent pain and disfigurement, sensory deprivation and overload,

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man-machine communion, the drug experience, the creative experience—and interpersonal relationships which include incest and assassination, father-son, leader-follower, human-pet, and *lots* more.

The economy of Delany's writing is both maddening and delightful—and *almost* accomplishes what he seems to have been trying to do. (For instance, the culture-vista opened up when the Lunar scholar, Katin, says to the gypsy Mouse: "If somebody had told me I'd be working in the same crew, today in the 31st century, with somebody who could honestly be skeptical about the Tarot, I don't think I would have believed it. You're really from Earth?") But even 279 closely written, richly embroidered, tautly thought pages are not enough: it is too much of too many, and too little of each: and —add odd complaints—it is too easy to read, on the easiest level.

If you let yourself go, it will run away with you; since the author failed to set up stop signs, the reader must either make his own (put the book down and pace the room once between chapters?) or plan on a second, slower reading after the fun of the first. Or settle, of course, for a good read, and never mind mining out the gold.

For two writers so disparately individual in concept, mood, style, background and viewpoint, Delany and R. A. Lafferty have certain startling distinctions in common. There are other notable stylists and fine prose writers in sf today; but—in very different modes—Lafferty and Delany are currently *the* two outstanding poetic writers (language both lyrical and precise; images exact and evocative). There are others evolving new concepts and working out appropriate new techniques for contemporary multiplexities; and there are *many* others writing action-adventure yarns in the sf idiom; but I can think of no others who so frequently manage to combine these apparently contradictory efforts.

But their greatest similarity also contains their most symptomatic difference. Among the characters in both men's stories a strange breed of children appear repeatedly: hardheaded/mystical creatures with electric personalities and powerful capacities. In Delany's stories they are most often young teen-agers whose essentially heroic proportions and proclivities (like almost all Delany characters) are dramatically flawed, or defective, or incurably disadvantaged, in some one area. Lafferty's children are mostly prepubescent, and perfectly normal —except for a total lack of (parental or personal) inhibition, and a sort of amplification-of-

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reality which permits them to act out archetypal childish fantasies on a grand-opera heroic scale.

Lafferty's first novel, THE PAST MASTER, was in another vein altogether. THE REEFS OF EARTH (Berkley, 60¢) is an utterly charming book in which a group of clever, nasty, appealing children somehow won my complete sympathy, approval, and delight, while indulging in as crude, self-centered, and sadistic a series of adventures as ever any noble, absurd, admired, epic (real or fictive) Hero.

Of course, the Dulanty kids, comparatively speaking, had cause. Even, to some extent, ethical justification.

First of all, they were not Earth people, but Pucas, and although all seven had been born on Earth, they were raised as Pucas, naturally, which meant their values and standards were basically different. When their parents began to disintegrate under the combined effects of Earth Allergy and Earth boredom, Elizabeth—the oldest—was nine; Helen and John, the two youngest were six. (I never did figure out how old Bad John was, but then he was usually invisible anyhow.) They were "faster and more intelligent than Earth children, and half of them—" (Elizabeth, Charles, and Helen) "—looked like angels or like handsome Earthlings. Their cousins, Peter and Dorothy and John and Bad John looked like potato-faced goblins, like real Pucas. . . ."

The older Dulanty's had been sent to Earth as what you might call missionaries, in a Puca sort of way, or maybe traders, or spies. It didn't work out too well.

"They had a hard time getting along with the people of Earth, and it wasn't entirely the fault of the Earth people. . . . It was after coming to Earth that they sowed their seven children (Bad John is included in this count). The children were thus citizens of Earth if they wished to be. Moreover, it was believed that by their birth on Earth they would have immunity to Earth Allergy, that killing sickness.

" 'Earth is, after all, one of the four worlds,' the Puca instructors had instructed them. 'Earth people are, comical though it seems, our cousins in blood. So far, the blood between us has been bad blood. . . .'

"Well, the Dulantys (and a few others) had been working at the problem for ten years and more. They had *not* achieved accord.

"Of the sisters, Veronica looked like an old potato, and Witchy was of an unearthly ('tis a Puca abhacht and not a pun) beauty. But who can say which was the more beautiful where they came from? . . .

"Henry Dulanty was tall and

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heavy. He looked like the ogre out of a fairy tale. He was. Earthers retain memories of earlier Pucas with such heads and hulks. . . . But the Earthers have lied about the ogre. He was the finest fellow you'd want to meet—in the daylight—not in the dark.

"His brother Frank was tall and lean. All four of the parents had a striking goblinish strangeness in their appearance, though Witchy's was shimmered over with beauty. . . .

"There is no use kidding about it. The Puca themselves are not handsome. And the people of Earth (they deserve that, they have so little else going for them) are. . . . Mostly, the Puca, if they happen to be born of a pretty appearance and face, are able to maintain it while they are young. But with the coming of maturity, the shattering profundity of the developing Puca character will smash and bevanish that pretty mask and replace it with a deeper face, intricate and ugly and of a high humor. . . ."

Most of the story concerns the adventures of the children after they arrive at the unhappy but logical conclusion that it has become necessary for them to kill everyone on Earth, except of course, themselves. They had to start with their parents because the Allergy had already disintegrated the adults' capacities and vitality beyond repair. They were too sentimental, really, to kill their parents, whom they loved, by hand, so they made a Bagarthach verse and sent it against them:

"We'll wither Witchy with a prank,
And kindle them in flames like roses—
Veronica and Hank and Frank—
And give them all Apotheosis."

They meant it to work by burning the house down that night, but they were not as experienced with Bagarthaches as they thought they were; it worked all right, but not quite the way they expected.

The next person on their list was wicked Coalfactor Stutgard, and John was supposed to handle him with an ax that same night, while the house was burning. That didn't work either, because someone else got there first. But they were learning all the time, and once they managed to get hold of some transportation, and set off for the Green River on Fulbert Fronsac's fishing raft, the *Ile de France,* they began to be able to do some fair amount of damage.

It is necessary to remember, of course, that in the world of the Dulantys, death is a very different condition from that visualized by Earthmen. (Even those of us who profess to a belief in an 'afterlife' rarely attain the sort of awareness of its pleasures and

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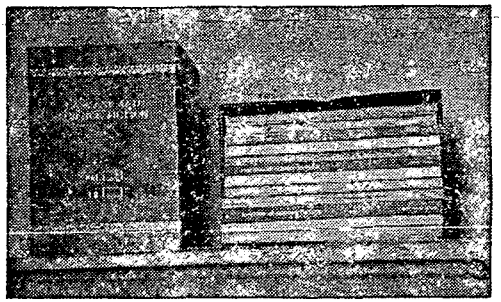
problems that is native and natural to the Puca mind.) This being true, murder is a considerably lesser crime, apparently, than unkindness. As for theft and deception, these are very relative acts for people who can change physical 'realities' simply by imagining them different, and then making a Bagarthach verse to confirm the change . . .

I mean, this is an utterly horrifying, completely captivating, funny, tragic, pluse-quickening, music-making Novel of the Absurd. It may not stick with you like PAST MASTER, but—well, I don't know, maybe it *will*.

What I'd *really* like, though, would be the book where the Dulanty kids square off against any half dozen assorted Delany kids. The Dulanty's being younger, I think it would be fair to throw in their natural access to assistance by offstage Puca (dead or alive) adults. WOW!

—JUDITH MERRIL



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*This is the third of Brian Cleeve's stories about the Devil and his left-hand man Belphagor. The dark duo have had their problems, beginning with being expelled from Hell by a militant labor union (*THE DEVIL AND DEMOCRACY, *November 1966) and ending (in* THE DEVIL AND JAKE O'HARA) *with a takeover of the Underworld by the wily O'Hara. Here, the Devil and his assistant seek employment, and their talents turn out to be a perfect match for two top executive jobs in television.*

THE DEVIL IN EXILE

by Brian Cleeve

"WHAT WE NEED," THE DEVIL said, moodily selecting another cold and soggy chip, "is a Government-in-Exile."

The table of Papadopoulos's Cafe was spread with week-old newspapers, liberally decorated with what looked like week-old stains of tomato sauce. The Devil and his one-time principal and now only follower, Belphagor, were sharing a rather scummy cup of tea and sixpence worth of fried chips. Absent-mindedly the Devil abstracted one end of his long, forked tail from his pocket and stirred the tea with it.

"What we need is a job," Belphagor said, shuddering slightly. "No, I don't feel like any tea, thanks. You finish it. A nice job somewhere in the sun. How about this—" He started reading an advertisement from the paper between them. "Systems Analyst wanted for—"

"Do you mind?" said the Devil, shutting his small, pouched eyes. A hard two years lay behind them since they were expelled from Hell by a militant trades union movement that had since developed into the Union of Devils Democratic Republics—one Republic for each of the Seven Circles of Hell—under the popular and

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democratic guidance of Jake O'-Hara, one-time Napoleon of London's underworld and now Party Secretary, President, Head of the Infernal Security Police, Chairman of the Trades Union Movement, and by infernal and unanimous acclaim the greatest writer, artist, musician, historian, scientist and thinker ever to darken Hell's Gates.

"That Irish no good drunken layabout," the Devil snarled, grinding his carious fangs on the last stale chip. "I gave him his first temptation. I taught him how to pick pockets before he was out of short trousers. I guided his every filthy footstep on the way to where he is now. And what do I get for it? Double-damned ingratitude, that's what I get." He tried to lash his tail in fury, but the result was so feeble that he quickly stuffed the end back into his sagging pocket, hoping that Belphagor hadn't noticed.

"Data Flow Controllers," Belphagor said. "This ad says 'New challenges, high rewards. Your responsibilities will include the scheduling and organization of the operational side of computer systems.' How about that?"

"Please," said the Devil, looking extremely tired.

"I'm only trying to help," whined Belphagor, becoming sullen. "It's not my fault he turned us down for pension rights."

"No trace can be found of any contributions having been received from you!" snarled the Devil, quoting from the extremely pompous letter they had lately received from the Hellish State Pensions Ministry.

"Why don' you two fin' a job?" the waitress Myra said, bending her more than thought-provoking bosom over the table to remove the empty cup and saucer. She was the daughter of the proprietor, much kept in order by her stern papa, and ancestral feminine temptations smoldered behind her dark eyes whenever she had occasion to brush her rounded flank against the Tempter's shoulder while serving him chips and weak tea or clearing the table. Without of course knowing that the small and seedy customer with the bedroom expression was indeed the Tempter of Eve, and all women.

"Why don' you?" she urged. "A frien' of mine was looking for bookies' runners only yest'day. 'Slot o' money to be made."

"Director General and Controller of Programming," Belphagor read. "The Island of Scotia Television Service invites applications from Senior Executives of proven ability—"

"Do you mind," the Devil said automatically, and then, struck by the word television, "what did you say?"

"Senior Executives of proven ability. The decisive factors will be initiative, imagination, boldness of constructive thought, ar-

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tistic integrity—why," Belphagor said breaking off in surprise, "they're describing us!"

"They are indeed," said the Devil, sitting up straight and giving Myra an extremely indelicate pinch. "What's the closing date? Suffering Hell, tomorrow! Myra, child," he scribbled hastily on the back of a used envelope—"Hold all decisions pending our arrival tomorrow p.m. We are the executives you need and must have. Signed Z. Bubb." He handed it to Myra with the pound note that he had extracted from her apron pocket while pinching her rear elevation. "Run to the Post Office, child, and transmit this message. Never fear for the Cafe. Belphy and I will look after it as if it were our own."

Off ran Myra and no sooner had her high-heeled footsteps faded down the street than the Devil had the till open and the money garnered from one hundred and twenty workmen's lunches and take-out pies clutched in his disreputable hand. "Thirty odd nicker," he said riffling through the notes and pouring the silver into his pocket alongside his tail. "That won't get us far. But I know a red-hot racing certainty for the three thirty and its now three twenty-three and a half."

Half an hour later, and richer by seven hundred and seventy-four pounds five shillings, they were in a taxi on the way to Saville Row for some off-the-peg but still impeccable gentlemen's suitings. From there a few steps took them to the Burlington Arcade for shoes and hats, shirts and discreet ties and linen; from thence to Piccadilly for luggage, shooting sticks, umbrellas and the small necessities of a gentleman's existence, like silver brandy flasks and onyx-mounted cigar cutters; then to the travel agent for first-class air tickets to Scotia; and finally to an exclusive little place just off St. James's Street for a Turkish Bath, massage, pedicure, manicure, facial and haircut, all provided by Japanese ladies of skill and charm; leaving our two friends in better shape to meet the searching examinations of the Interview Board than anyone could have imagined a few hours earlier, seeing—and if the truth be told, sniffing—them in Papadopoulos's Cafe, where at exactly that moment an irate papa P. was reproving his daughter for her negligence with the aid of a sweeping broom.

"I think," the Devil said, surveying a mirror-polished finger nail, "that that should do. At least for Scotia."

And indeed it did. In answer to a second telegram, the Interview Board was assembled in the spacious Board Room of the Television Station at 4 p.m. to await their latest applicants' arrival. The The Board consisted of the Prime Minister, the Minister for Finance,

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the Minister for Communications, the Archbishop, and the Chairman of the Television Authority, Mr. Gustavus Nagg, with his good lady Mrs. Nagg, chairwoman of the League for Decent Viewing (known to the irreverent few as the LDV, or League of Dreadful Virgins).

"Gentlemen," said the Devil, carelessly tossing his twenty-guinea trilby hat (hand-stitched silk lining in apple green, perspiration band in gold-tooled Yugoslavian wild boar skin) onto the quarter acre of mahogany boardroom table. "Gentlemen, I am not a man to beat about the bush, or shilly, or shally, or say one thing and mean another—or alternatively to wrap up my meaning in an obscure flow of high-sounding but meaningless words. I say what I think. I think what I say. I form rapid opinions and change them empirically and pragmatically, frankly and fearlessly as the occasion demands. In fact I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, and without any craven regard for the consequences, be they what they may, gentlemen, and I would repeat that to a man's face, to any man's face—I think I may say, and my colleague will bear me out in that—" at which he turned with exquisitely courteous condescension to Belphy, who was undoing his own unbelievably elegant doeskin gloves with only a whit less carelessness than his master had used in tossing his hat onto the table.

"Unquestionably," Belphy said. "Without a doubt."

"I like these two men," the Prime Minister was whispering to the Minister for Communications. "They know what they're saying. No dillying or dallying. Fearless. Frank. Good chaps."

"What *are* they saying?" said the Minister for Finance, who was always a trifle behind at meetings.

"That they are fearless and frank," hissed Mrs. Nagg, who was less favorably impressed, particularly by those two qualities. "How're yer on morals? Morals. Know what I mean? Morals."

"Fearless and f—" began Belphy, until the Devil kicked him severely on his silk-clad ankle (long black socks, without clocks, naturally, and supported equally naturally by gentleman's black elastic suspenders, three guineas the pair, as supplied to His Majesty Edward VII and other crowned heads. No true gentleman would wear any other) and having kicked his minion into agonized silence the Devil took it smoothly up—

"Fearlessness and frankness, as my colleague was about to say, have their places, their honored and invaluable places in many areas of broadcasting—but in the field of morals, the delicate, controversial, invaluable, excruciatingly difficult and beyond ques-

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tion thorny, much-debated, vexed and infinitely to be pondered upon field of morals—there, there I make no bones about saying, and say it forthrightly, without fear or favor, or lip service to the manifold pressures of this day and age, there I say, what is required is guardianship, control, balance, lack of equivocation. One must take a position, I say it no matter what the consequences, one must hold the fort, one must nail one's colors to the mast, one must—"

But at this point the Archbishop could restrain himself no longer and with a loud cry of "Amen!" leaned across the corner of the vast table and shook the Devil warmly by the hand. "Splendid fellows!" he cried. "The second I saw their ties I knew they must be!"

The Devil caressed his soberly sumptuous Old Etonian silk tie with a modest forefinger. Belphy lowered his chin equally modestly on the properly tightened knot of his Old Harrovian colors (the Cricket Club to be precise), while Gustavus Nagg, who was merely an industrialist by background and had gone to an extremely common school, said irritably, "Ties, ties, what ties?" which clinched the matter for his more socially conscious spouse, who, without having recognized the ties herself, was eager both to please the Archbishop and to snub her husband.

"Of course they are splendid fellows," she said. "I take it we are agreed then? The other seven hundred and ninety-three candidates had quite unacceptable views on morals. Quaaiite unnacceptable. I'm delighted to find a fellow moralist in this decadent age in which we are condemned to live. Archbishop? Are we wending the same way homeward?"

"Agreed," the Minister for Finance said in a firm tone, this having been the last word of Mrs. Nagg's that he had grasped and understood in its entirety. He said it more to convey that he was following the conversation than to signify his own agreement, which would have required a much longer process of thought on his part. But his calm, clear utterance, matched with the calm, clear vacuity of his piercing gaze (political assets, both of them, of the first order, and the ones above all others that had raised him to ministerial rank and might yet lift him higher), these two factors carried the utmost weight with the Prime Minister, who had arrived where he was by waiting to hear what the majority thought and then thinking it too.

"Agreed, agreed," the Prime Minister said with a challenging air as if he was taking a decision of his own instead of echoing his colleagues. And indeed he was for once happy to echo them, for he did truly find the two applicants

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a most sympathetic pair. Men after his own heart as he said next day in the cabinet.

"Aye," said Mr. Nagg doubtfully. "But hooald oan a minut, ah wooan't be rooshed. How's about all this eemparshality bizness they tark about? How art thee on that, eh lad?" Mrs. Nagg closed her eyes. The Archbishop looked at the ceiling.

"Ah yes—yes, impartiality," the Devil said, feeling his way. "Hmmm. It would be fair to say —in fact it must be said—without doubt, and without begging the question or beating about the bush, indeed even without fear or favor, that impartiality is, and must be, and must always remain, the crux, the essence, the quintessence, one might almost say the vital force, the focal fulcrum, the hub and center of all broadcasting policy and practice—"

While he had been speaking he had also been bending a covert but keen look on each member of the board in turn, and had noticed an expression of dismay, not to speak of despondent gloom, spread over the features of the Prime Minister and the Minister for Communications.

"But—" he added smoothly, "while I myself am personally dedicated, not to say devoted, to the consummate and deeply satisfying pleasures of impartiality, I am not a man to let my private whims run away with my professional judgments and the needs of the Great Square-Eyed Master whose humble servants we all are. I would be the first to concede, in fact I would hasten to admit, and even fearlessly assert, that to carry impartiality too far would be a grave and dangerous precedent. Indeed an excess of impartiality would be a kind of partiality on the wrong side. And let me assure you, madam, gentlemen, that I would never—"

"Damn all this ethical stuff," said the Minister for Finance, struggling to keep up. "Whose side is the feller going to be on? Ours or theirs?"

"The right side!" cried the Devil, jumping to his feet and pointing a quivering finger at the startled Prime Minister, in whose ears the cry "the right side" had sounded like the knell of doom. But before his fears could become articulate, the Devil swept on, "The side of Justice! Of fair play! Of decency! Of motherhood! Of humble faith and honest doubt, the side of the innocent, of the simple taxpayer by his rose-covered garage door; of the chubby lad spending his quiet evenings filling in the family football coupon for his sweet old silver-haired grandmother! The side that you —you, Sir—have dignified by your leadership, your example, your fearlessness, your frankness —yes, and come what may, I must, I shall say it, whatever the

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consequences—your simple, bedrock decency, your humility, your passionate concern for truth, for justice, for the simple virtues, for the happiness of the voting classes, your—your—I—I can't go on, it's too much, I'm overcome—"

The Devil sat down covering his eyes. Belphy had already covered his. The Prime Minister wiped a surreptitious tear from his own trembling cheek. Mrs. Nagg blew her nose. The Finance Minister said cautiously "I didn't quite catch—"

"That's the kind of chap I like," whimpered the Prime Minister to no one in particular. "A man who's not afraid to speak his mind to my face. I could never have given this job to a yes man."

"Well, ah dooan't knaw," said Mr. Nagg. "Ah dooan't onnerstand awl this intellecshul stoof, but if you'm soddisfied—"

"I am, I am," wept the Prime Minister. "Any—any more questions?" He could hardly expect such another burst of incisive and constructive criticism and political insight from the new Director General, at least immediately, but he couldn't prevent himself from hoping. "Have *you* any questions?" he asked the Minister for Communications.

"As a matter of fact there is just one more question I'd like to put," said the Minister apologetically. "Hate to be technical and all that, but could I—might I—I mean—dammit, I don't want to sound vulgar—"

At which Mrs. Nagg threw up her eyes and whispered loudly to the Archbishop "If wishes were horses!" The Archbishop tried to look gently reproving.

"—sound vulgar," the wretched Minister pursued. He had been to almost as nasty a school as Mr. Nagg. "But—what kind of broadcasting experience have you got? Eh?"

The Devil let the full vulgarity of the words and thought make themselves felt, while he smiled with a pleasant condescension. Just as the embarrassed silence threatened to become painful, the Devil crossed one elegant tweed-clad leg over the other and said, "I'm glad you asked me that, sir." The word "sir" falling like the lightest of sardonic and dignified reproofs. "I may say, and my colleague will support me—" mutual grave nods of question and answer, "in saying, that we have spent our working lives in the Communications Industry. It has been our lifelong undertaking to guide, to teach, to entertain as large a portion of mankind as we could reach with the means at our command. I may also say, without fear of contradiction, that we have reached a great portion of it. And if I may descend to the vulgar argument of success, I would further claim, without much fear

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of contradiction, that we have given greater pleasure to a greater number of people—in earthly terms of course—" he coughed delicately, "than the Opposition have ever done." He coughed again.

"Capital," mumbled the wretched Minister. "Tophole record, tophole," his grasp of upper-class slang being somewhat uncertain. "Support you of course."

"Goodbye, Mr.—Mr.—" said Mrs. Nagg, holding out a manly moral hand.

"Bubb, ma'am," said the Devil, grasping it fondly. "Z. Bubb, B.L. Always at your service ma'am."

"B.L.?" queried the Minister for Finance.

"Bachelor of Laws," whispered the Prime Minister. "What a splendid fellow."

Three days later the Devil and Belphy were installed in their new offices. "This," the Devil said, toying with his onyx and gold cigar cutter, "this is better than any Government-in-Exile. One quick cablegram and then down to business. To the Papadopoulos Cafe. Please accept one year's free advertising on Scotia TV compliments of Z. Bubb. Please send Myra earliest possible plane to Scotia to assume interesting position on TV. That should fix father and daughter. Now—"

The "business" referred to was extremely simple. To recruit a suitable staff for a little private project of their own. Television even in its short career has collected about its fringes a sad flotsam of failures: neurotic producers, alcoholic scriptwriters, intemperate interviewers, even some young lady assistants who have fallen below the strict standards of morality exacted, and rightly exacted, of employees in so sensitive and influential an industry.

Such pitiable refuse tends to collect in certain disreputable drinking dens in unsavory parts of London and Manchester—and possibly New York, for all I know to the contrary—where between sad bouts of intemperance, they boast pathetically of past TAM ratings and cataclysmic rows with Director Generals and other Public Enemies of television workers. And it was amongst these sodden outcasts that the Devil and Belphy searched for their instruments. Their purpose being no less than to put out a second and clandestine series of programs, comencing well after midnight when all good television viewers are tucked up in bed for the eight hours of Close Down, and ending at cock crow. And it was not many months before their purpose became accomplished fact.

This secret, second program schedule was masterly in its simple hewing to well-proven formulae. It began with a cartoon series for the teenies—"Super Imp," in

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which a handsome and muscular baby devil invariably outwitted the slow and lumpish angels foolish enough to cross his path. For of course this program, like all the programs, was beamed not to the sleeping Scotians, but to the wakeful inhabitants of Hell, who as a matter of fact had for some time been extremely bored with the simple-minded "do-badding" approach of Hell's one-channel monopoly station, full of down-drive and exhortations to torture harder for less pay, and in which the high spot of the night's viewing was likely to be the Life Story of a Stakhanovite imp who worked for no pay at all.

The Devil's new station, known from its call sign as Station KERSS, was what Hell had been waiting for without knowing it.

"The DAM ratings are up again!" Belphy would gibber indiscreetly in the mornings. (Devils AdMass, Inc. supplied the ratings, of course.)

After "Super Imp" would come family-viewing time with old films such as "Hell's Angels," dance shows like "Striporama," or weepies like "Filth's End," the simple emotional story of a typical Hellish suburb, with its homely adulteries and murders, blackmailings and abortions. Or sex-comedy series—"Hell's Bells," the inside story of the Vatican through the Ages—TOMORROW! ALEXANDER THE BORGIA POPE! ORGIES! GIRLS! POISONINGS! YOU'LL LAUGH TILL YOU BUST!—no wonder the DAM ratings went up. Then the news, "Hell's Scandals." And for peak-viewing time, shows like "Kinky Doll," featuring the Karate Kitten (Myra), dressed in her trademark of black PVC fisherman's thigh boots and a kinky smile, fighting the bad fight, delivering karate chops to oily, virtuous clergymen, or seducing bishops, or simply wrestling with her conscience and winning. While for old-fashioned, strait-laced devils there were educational and religious programs. "The Black Mass," "Readings from the Kama Sutra," or "Ten Lessons in Torture for Junior Devils."

And between programs, the Message. The Devil sitting careworn and earnest at his desk, smoking a curly briar pipe, his brow furrowed. "The Chief *cares!* About YOU!" Just a few effective seconds. While Scotian pipe music wailed softly in the background "Will he no' come back again?"

Or the Devil kissing a baby imp. Or a straight question: "What happened to the Furnace Tenders Trades Union Holiday Fund?" referring to a well-known Hellish scandal of the moment in which one of Jake O'Hara's lieutenants figured unpleasantly. With the clear implication that that kind of thing didn't happen

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in the Chief's time. Or the Devil and Belphy frolicking with Myra and a couple of rather wayward secretaries. "Hell ought to be FUN!" allowing the viewer to draw his own conclusions as to whether Hell was fun under the increasingly sour and dictatorial rule of Jake O'Hara.

The effect was almost instantaneous. Two asbestos envelopes arrived containing extremely large checks and an effusive note from Hell's Minister of Pensions (signed personally by the Minister), deeply regretting a grave departmental error in rejecting pension claims from his esteemed one-time colleagues, Z. Bubb and B. Gore, and hastening to offer not only their full pensions, Ministerial Grade 1A, but back-dating them for two years, with a little bonus as "appreciation money." The one condition being that of course Z. Bubb and B. Gore would forthwith cease all gainful employments, which no doubt at their age they would be glad to do.

The Devil cashed the checks and carried on broadcasting. O'Hara's next step was to try to broadcast right back, but lacking skilled technicians, since naturally very few television persons have yet found their way to the lowest depths, this resulted in no more than a little interference with daytime viewing in Scotia. Certainly once or twice a distorted message did flash onto Scotian screens, such as "Your TV is the Devil's work," but viewers put this down to the activities of the League for Decent Viewing, and apart from one indignant license holder heaving a dead cat through the Naggs' drawing room window, it had no effect. The less so because whatever the Devil and Belphy put out secretly in the small hours of the morning, their official programs were of unparalleled respectability, not to say dullness.

"At last I can sleep at nights," Mrs. Nagg would often say at League meetings, "without my mind being *sullied* by memories of the unspeakable filth my conscience obliged me to watch during an evening's monitoring of our Scotian broadcasts. Our League must pass a vote of thanks to dear Mr. Bubb, and dear Mr. Gore."

But no such kindly thoughts were in the mind of Jake O'Hara. Hell was in sullen turmoil. Ranging from a simple rebellion against the abysmal quality of Hell's own TV programs, to a fury of questioning about scandals exposed by the KERSS news programs, to a steadily gathering groundswell of opinion that what Hell needed was a change of government. "Will he no come back again" became Top of the Pops with the imps and teenage devils. Ambiguously worded buttons reading "To Hell with O'Hara" appeared in every lapel, accompanied by mock-

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ing smiles as the wearer passed anyone in authority. The trade in TV antennas doubled in a month and doubled again. On Tuesday nights ("Filth's End," "Kinky Doll," and a new educational program, "Learn Karate with Myra"), it was impossible to find a single imp or devil in Hell who would do a fork's prod of overtime. Even the souls began sneaking off the griddles—previously it had been part of their punishment to have to watch State TV—and clustering round TV shop windows or the doorways of pubs that had TV sets in the bar. But one of the Devil's most effective little Messages was simply "O'Hara's State barmen water the beer." In fact it was O'Hara's unwise decision to take all the TV sets out of the State Pubs and Wimporamas that precipitated the end.

It couldn't go on. Even the devils closest to O'Hara were beginning to look nervous. They tried jamming the KERSS broadcasts, but they simply lacked the skill to blot them out altogether, and by merely half spoiling the picture without touching the sound, they got the worst of both worlds, enraging the entire population without depriving them of the Message. Until the aforementioned folly of depriving State drinkers of the pleasure of watching "Filth's End" and "Kinky Doll" while they drank their flat and watered State beer provoked an explosion that was anyway inevitable. O'Hara barely escaped with his skin. A few hours later the Devil and Belphy were back in the Seventh Circle.

And there, so far as I know, they've remained ever since. Certainly they haven't been back working in earthly TV. I mean, if they had been you could tell, couldn't you?

Coming next month . . .

It's been far too long since we've published one of **Zenna Henderson's** special and popular stories about the "People." That situation will be corrected next month with publication of Miss Henderson's new novelet, THE INDELIBLE KIND. Also, new stories by **Ron Goulart, James H. Schmitz** and **Josephine Saxton.**

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Modern coins have little or no intrinsic value. They are tokens whose value is determined through the stability and power of the government that mints them. Thus, you would expect coins to play an insignificant role in a story about a post-holocaust civilization where traditional forms of government have collapsed. Not so in this ingenious tale by Leo Kelley, which builds around another traditional use for coins.

COINS

by Leo P. Kelley

TONIGHT WAS AFTERIT.

It had been Afterit for at least as long as Lank could remember, which was nineteen Tosses, eleven of which—ever since his eighth year, as the ancient ritual required—he had participated in and none of which he had Lost. For which he was glad.

Now, as he made his way through the network of upright spears that had been living trees Beforeit, night caressed him with her veloured paws, and he thrilled to her touch, unable to suppress the sense of pleasure flooding through him even though he was on his way to his twentieth Toss.

He splashed through a shallow stream and shook himself vigorously when he reached the other side. Water flew from his long-haired head and from the bark girdle he wore around his loins. Safely tucked inside his left cheek, his Coin clicked against his teeth.

The urge to stretch seized him. He spat out his Coin, clawed it from the dirt and expertly tossed it.

Heads, I stretch.

Tails.

Lank cursed.

Resignedly, he replaced his Coin in the pouch of his cheek, the dirt on it grinding granular between his teeth. He hurried on toward the hill facing him. *Tails.*

Up ahead, riding high on the

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hill, was the first slice of the new moon. When Lank reached the top of the hill, the moon had fled far into the sky. Down he went and past the skeletal ruins of Randland, fear sweating his nearly naked hide, and on through the countryside strewn with Beforeit things. Melted autos. Smashed steeples.

He paused at the Place of Pits, nostrils quivering, eyes slitted, legs taut. A sound. His tongue swirled in his mouth, pushing his Coin between his teeth and closed lips. He waited, poised, watching.

She climbed out of one of the Pits and began to hurry off into the distance, the thick ashes swirling about her ankles, dead and desolate, to chronicle her passing.

Lank spat. His Coin hit his waiting hand, dizzied up, down. *Heads to kill, tails to take.* The Coin stared up at him, a copper eye in the ashes. *Tails!*

Lank sprang forward until he formed a cunning barrier in front of the girl. He turned around twice, muttering, weaving his head from side to side. She did not toss her Coin and it wondered him. Instead, she swerved swiftly and began to run away from him.

He ran after her, pawing the dirt to dust, turning, turning. She paid no attention to his courting. He pounced upon her, and the blind craters of the Place of Pits were at first the only witness to their encounter.

The girl moaned beneath him and her sharp teeth pierced his shoulder twice, amusing him. Bite she might, but she will bear a baby, Coins willing, thought the lunging Lank. And it will have eyes the color of blood like mine.

Passing by, others of both sexes darted among the fire-blackened beams and sagging girders, pausing to point and shrill their laughter at the scene taking place before them as they all made for the site of the annual Toss.

Lank withdrew from the girl and sprawled, bellying down on the hard ground, his heart hammering. He touched a finger to the flesh of his shoulder that had been torn by the girl's teeth, wet it, touched the wound again. The taste of his blood sat salty on his tongue.

He pretended not to see her slide toward him, but as her arm came up, he rolled away. Her arm came down and the piece of Beforeit glass sliced into the earth. *Coça,* it said greenly.

And then fear filled Lank. Not fear born of the possibility of his own spilled blood but an even darker one. The girl, he realized, had not Tossed before she struck! He was certain of it! He had been watching her all the time.

"Coin," he snarled, a damning.

Her head rose inches above the dirt. Her tongue flicked out between the gates of her lips. "Kill," she said.

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"You did not Toss," he accused. He began to fear this girl more than the deadly ruins of Randland or the poisoned seas that some said still steamed somewhere. She could not have seen more than eight or nine Tosses, Lank calculated. That would make him older than her. Wiser?

She reached—a movement like the flick of a whip—for her weapon. Lank brought his fist down hard on her hand. The fragment of glass remained imbedded impotent in the earth.

"You *decided!*" he growled.

She threw her long hair around her as if to hide herself in it. "Not the first time."

Lank flung her weapon into the nearest Pit. He felt defiled. The girl had decided, Coinlessly, to kill him. As she rose and ran around the rim of the Pit, Lank watched her go, wishing that his own Coin had come up Heads. Then he could have killed her. Now she was gone. And he was sick with loathing. He had heard it whispered, heard that there were moments of madness that sometimes came upon one when action did not follow a Toss but was taken by choice. He shook his head and thanked Coins that now was not Beforeit. But the thought nagged him. Could the old ways from Beforeit return? The thought brought fear and, in fear's wake, rage. He hoped the girl would lose The Toss.

She did. So did Lank.

He had searched for her among the hundreds of people gathered at the site of The Toss and found her lying prone on the bare branch of a dead tree. He stood some distance away, hardly able to take his eyes from her who was capable of such evil. He saw her place her Coin in the cavity of her right ear, ready.

In front of the crowd of which Lank and the girl were fragments, on the symbolic mound of debris perched a naked boy, too young to have ever Tossed himself, the Chosen for this Toss. Charred wood, twisted metal, white and broken bones—such was the dais on which the solemn, dirty-eyed child stood, grasping the Coin invisible in his little fist.

"Toss!" A murmur rippling through the crowd.

"Toss!" A plea that many secretly wished would go unheeded.

And then a rising tide of sibilance accompanied by a swaying of bodies and a glinting of circular silver and copper omens in the air as the crowd tossed their own Coins over and over again, urging the child to action.

Tossss, Tossss, Tossss!

A hush. A collective taking-in of breath. A sterile silence.

The child raised his fist, opened it, curled back a thumb, let the Coin rest on his crooked index finger. And Tossed. At the same instant, oddly ecstatic, he cried,

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"Tails you Win, Heads you Lose!"

Up, his Coin. Down into his tiny palm. Up, the eyes of the crowd. Up their own Coins. Down.

"Heads!" screamed the child hysterically, falling on the heap of refuse and clawing at his face.

Lank looked slowly down at his own hand. *Heads.* He went rigid. Then, he thought to look up at the tree and the girl. Her head was high, her eyes glowing. Then, Lank reasoned, she has Tossed Tails. As he began to move away in the company of all the other Losers, he almost forgot her, thinking only of the horror that awaited him and which must be borne.

As he and the others began their trek, he located the girl on the outer edge of the crowd. Unconcerned, or so seeming, she walked through the dust and litter.

Lank moved toward her; the lure of evil in his nostrils. He had lain with her. But he did not think of that now. He wanted to see what she would do when they all went down into the bowels of Randland.

There was no one to urge them on. And they needed no urging. Because this was the way it was in the beginning of Afterit and had always been, as far as they knew. The Coins decreed. So they marched for most of the night amid wails and weeping and the tearing of hair. To Randland.

When they arrived, they entered the scarred and broken building and found the passage that led down into the earth where terror lurked. Other Losers before them had carved crude steps that descended the sides of the empty elevator shaft.

Lank approached the girl. "I am he of the early night," he reminded her, his throat dry, sweat a chill net on his bare skin.

She merely glanced up at him as she might have glanced at a sky empty of stars.

"I am glad you Lost," he said harshly.

She shrugged. "Not the first time."

"How many times have you Tossed?"

"Nine. I Lost last time too. But I lived."

"I have always Won," Lank declared proudly.

"Until now."

"Until now."

"When you—all of us—will be Coinless. As it was Beforeit."

They reached the bottom of the shaft and gathered together in the steel room.

"I am Doll," the girl said.

"I, Lank."

"Uncoin yourselves!" boomed a Voice. It came from nowhere; it came from everywhere.

Came the sound of falling metal, a noisy rain. An abandoned

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harvest, Coins of every denomination littered the antiseptic floor. Half dollars, dimes, quarters, pennies, nickels—gods dying without disciples.

"To the left! To your left!" The Voice again.

"What will they do to us?" Lank asked.

"They say it is different each time," Doll replied. "And yet the same."

Her answer made no sense to Lank and offered him no measure of comfort.

Suddenly, ten even rows of colored buttons burst from the previously smooth surface of the wall.

"You who were men and women," the Voice addressed them. "Uncoined as you are, choose!"

The people stared fearfully at the colored buttons and at each other. This was all so different from anything they had known or imagined on the drab and atom-raped surface of the earth now so far above them.

"Push and press. Push and press. To push or not to push?" intoned the Voice mindlessly.

A woman hesitantly pressed the button nearest her, flattening it against the panel. Immediately, food appeared on tables that rose out of the floor, toppling startled people.

Ravenously, remembering their hunger that had been temporarily forgotten in their fear, many ate.

Lank stepped forward, reaching for an unfamiliar fruit.

Doll intercepted his arm. "Do not," she said.

He stared at her puzzled. But he did not eat.

A man beside Lank, still chewing, pressed the greenest of the buttons, obviously encouraged by the appearance of the food in response to the woman's choice.

Acid sprayed down in translucent streams upon the screaming people as they fled into other rooms that opened off the one containing the buttons.

There, howling, they tried to nurse their burned flesh. There, too, many of them died of food poisoning.

Lank bellowed his pain which came not from scalded skin but terror that scraped at all his senses. He ran back through the room now cleansed of its deadliness and along the passage to where the elevator shaft should be. Instead of the shaft, he found a solid wall. Whimpering, he went back into the room with the moneyed floor and searched in panic for his Coin. He found it, recognizing it by the nicks he had made in the copper face of the bearded man on its surface.

He Tossed. The Coin told him to flee. His whimper became a moan because he could not obey. The impenetrable wall prevented him from doing so. Despairing, he put the Coin into his mouth.

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"Push and press, push and press. Choose a button. *Decide!*"

The people, those who still lived, were flung back into the room of the buttons by long, rectangular ramrods that came pulsing piston-like out of the walls, forcing them to press buttons desperately, randomly.

As they did so, little knives sliced through the room and through flesh. Thin needles of flame spurted like red fish to fry them and silence many mouths alive with shrieks.

Lank squeezed himself into the juncture made by two walls joining, eyes wide, saliva slipping from his lips. He saw Doll fall to the floor. He hesitated. And then he leaped forward, dodging flames, seized her and dragged her to his tiny refuge. Amazed at his own action, he let her slump to the floor at his feet as the wall suddenly came alive and the three-dimensional figure of a man appeared in helmet and torn uniform, surrounded by brilliant flowers which, Lank guessed, must have grown Beforeit. He watched the man move, crouching, through the foliage that hid no single bird, saw another man appear and the thing in his hand blaze, heard the loud blast, saw the first man falter and fall. Blood, thick, soaking the man's uniform and the flowers. The dying man's eyes stared out of the wall at Lank. Such surprise, he thought, in his face, in his eyes. Like when the wild dogs scent me on the Plains and come baying. Then look I like that.

Another Voice: "I have made my decision, gentlemen! And my decision, as you are all aware, is both final and binding on the nation. I have decided to declare—"

In the wall now appeared a console of switches and buttons and fingers which tirelessly pressed, flicked. Then, a Beforeit place. Stones and bricks and bodies. All bursting, bursting like flowers of flame in a garden of white light. And over all, thick halos of dense smoke followed by the roaring, wicked wind of the firestorm.

"Gentlemen, I have made my decision!"

The image began to fade from the wall.

A malicious ghost, the echo, "—my decision!"

Lank felt relief threaten to totter him. He helped Doll to her feet. "It ends," he told her and himself.

Slowly, Doll shook her head, clearly doubting.

A rasping noise and then the sudden soft sound of a woman's desperate voice, pleading.

"Stop building this thing, Murphy, please! This is not the way. It wasn't our decision-making that was wrong. Only some of our decisions. Anyway, it's over now."

Lank stiffened, listening, wary.

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"Go to hell, Marie! The Toss I've been teaching the Survives and this macabre little circus I'm ringmastering here will guarantee no more war—ever! Soon as I get the bugs out of it. Hey, watch out! You've tripped the wrong tape. Shut it off. It's picking us up and—"

After a moment, the Voice again, "Push and press, push and press. *Choose!*"

From the cowering people in the room, "No!"

"Decide!"

"Nooo, oh, nooo!"

Lank was silent, watching, listening. So was Doll.

"Will you not then?"

In answer, only pleas for mercy from those who had never known any.

The Voice again, emotionless, calm. "You have seen your ancestors and the results of their decisions. Their decisions," the Voice continued, "made by themselves with the faulty fiber of their own individual brains. Go and do not likewise!"

From somewhere in the distance, Lank heard the *chink* of metal moving against metal. He turned and stared down the passage, Doll beside him. In the steel room, the wall had slid back, revealing the steps that led up the sides of the elevator shaft.

"Decide not!" cried the Voice. "You have seen the bitter fruit of decision-making!"

Numbly, the people picked up their Coins. Some kissed them; some pressed them to their foreheads. Others made strange motions in the air with them. The wall went dark and became only a wall again.

The people fled from the room and eagerly began to climb up the elevator shaft, Lank among the first of them. The dead remained.

Halfway up he halted, ignoring the curses and cries of the people below him. Kicking and shouting, he fought his way back down again, tumbling people beneath him to the floor of the shaft.

"Come!" he called to Doll who was still standing alone in the now silent room.

"Go," she told him, shaking her head. "I will not go back up there. Only death is there. I will stay here."

Anger turned Lank like a top away from her. Then he whirled to face her again. "You will die here? That is what you will do, Coin or no Coin?"

She nodded, looking not at him but at the floor.

He spat his Coin into his hand. He Tossed. But then, strangely sad, letting his Coin fall unheeded to the floor, he sprang forward and through the doorway, grabbed Doll's wrist and began to drag her toward the shaft as—

"Uncoin yourselves!" boomed the Voice again. It came from nowhere; it came from everywhere.

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Lank spun around, startled.

"To the left, to your left!"

Moving lithely, Lank ran back to the now buttonless wall and waited. Soon, as he had anticipated, the buttons reappeared.

"Push and press. Push and press."

Crouching, he sniffed along the wall where it met the floor. The odor of age. He felt the floor with his fingers. Heat. He ran back to where his Coin had fallen, picked it up and returned to the panel of buttons. He inserted the Coin into the crack where the panel failed to meld perfectly with the wall that held it. Working diligently for many minutes, he succeeded at last in swinging the panel away from the wall. His Coin clinked as it fell to the floor unheeded.

He peered cautiously through the space behind the panel and saw the tapes spinning silently on their wheels, the fuel cell powering the automated complex that was activated by the myoelectric impulses from human bodies as they entered the room through the narrow door, and the skeleton lying on the floor in its robe of rags.

Understanding nothing, Lank studied the letters embroidered in red on the crumbling cloth: R E P E N T. . .

His mouth felt desolate, empty of his Coin.

Later, after they had discovered the door into the automated computer room, they found the lockers from which the frost-free food had come, and the conveyor belt which carried it to and deposited it on the tables ready to thrust up through the floor, and the vials of poison that dipped to spill their deadliness upon the potatoes, the pickles, the oranges.

They ate as they had refrained from doing when the food first appeared in the other room. Lank glanced at Doll. Although he was terribly tired, a longing in his loins pierced him. *I want,* he thought. But his Coin, he remembered, was lying on the floor in the next room. Without it, he could not—

Doll saw the stunned expression like dull fire on his face. And then she felt his touch on her arm—that of first one finger, then his whole hand—and it shattered her with its clumsy gentility and she let herself weep.

"You would not let me eat when first there was food," Lank said wonderingly. He hesitated, staring in suspicious ignorance at the still-spinning program tapes and the glowing fuel cell.

"I had Lost before," Doll said. "I was afraid of what might happen."

Lank led her from the room and carefully closed the door behind him and somewhat fearfully replaced the panel of buttons. An uneasiness gripped him. He wanted desperately to be away

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from this place of the Lost and up on the familiar surface of the earth and under the stars.

Doll pointed to the floor. "Your Coin?"

Lank stared at it glinting in the clean light that was a kind of darkness. He spat upon it in an anger born of despair. "We go," he said.

"Coinless?" With a giant hope.

"Together." With a dwarfing fear.

They climbed the shaft and emerged in the darkness that was a painful kind of light.

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Joseph Harris lives in Aiken, South Carolina, where he is headmaster of the Episcopal School, Mead Hall. We are further informed that Mr. Harris's politics are independent; his hobby is book collecting; and that his stories and poems have appeared in The Literary Review, The Georgia Review, The Prairie Schooner *and others. His first story for F&SF concerns one Timothy Porterfield, a prolific writer of detective stories, for whom death was only the mildest form of writer's block.*

A SCORE FOR TIMOTHY

by Joseph Harris

When death came to Timothy Porterfield, great efforts were made to conceal the fact. And for a very strange reason.

Growing up as a deprived youth in a small Appalachian mining community, then as an itinerant preacher of fiery sermons to his own mountain folk, Timothy had for the last forty years of his life been a world-renowned writer of detective fiction. Turning out works of crime and rascality at the rate of two books per year had earned for him all the advantages he had lacked as a youth. Among these advantages at his death were three homes, four secretaries, a yacht, five automobiles, innumerable vested interests, and other benefits too numerous to mention. His following among readers of detective fiction, once polled as the largest in the world, had only recently been surpassed in the Bond age.

Timothy was in his late seventies when his conversion to spiritualism came, and as was usual with any cause he espoused, once committed, he gave himself to it with a fervor verging on fanaticism. The advent of his conversion was a séance in which his recently dead wife (two ex-wives were still alive) spoke through a medium to him in words so convincingly intimate that nothing

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could sway his belief in that not impossible she. His conviction was in fact so great that he persuaded the medium that her gifts should be devoted solely to *his* cause—to provide once-and-for-all, irrefutable proof that man survived bodily death. This was to be his cause célèbre, the crown of his long and successful career as a writer.

To the skeptics among the few who knew of his occult preoccupations, Timothy proudly pointed to another great writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, no less than the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Here was another great man who had looked into that bourn from which no traveler returns for the evidence of things unseen. But where that great genius had failed, he, Timothy Porterfield, was supremely confident he would succeed. He would leave a body of posthumous works that would confound skeptics and scholars and finally bring an unbelieving world to its knees. They would continue to read his books and stand in awe of one whose genius had achieved the ultimate by continuing to create from beyond the grave. For Timothy there was not the slightest doubt of success, for he had planned everything to the smallest detail. It was now merely a matter of passing on to that next dimension which man called death.

Only two people were present when Timothy, his great leonine head framed in silken pillows, breathed his last in a hotel room in a little town of southern France. A portly woman of late middle-age, Amanda Cartwright was the clairvoyant and constant companion Timothy had chosen after his conversion to spiritualism. The other was a wiry little man in his fifties, hawk-faced and unimposing, who was known simply as Wellington. He had been Timothy's chauffeur for fifteen years.

In the last month when it became obvious his days were numbered, Timothy called these two to his bedside and presented each with several thousand dollars in cash, swore them to secrecy, and explained the details of his plans for a posthumous life.

For Wellington, the part was simple. He would merely take the money, arrange the details of transferring the Cadillac into his own possession, and ride off into an anonymous sunset, forever pledged to the covenant he had made with his dying master. But for Amanda Cartwright quite another career lay ahead. She was the chosen one, the amanuensis, the instrument through whom the indefatigable Timothy Porterfield would continue to thrill his reading audience. All this at the increased rate—he was convinced he would experience greater creative vitality beyond the grave—of three books a year!

Widely known in learned cir-

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cles for her gift of automatic writing, Amanda Cartwright had demonstrated several other paranormal gifts as well. She had been checked and rechecked by leading authorities in psychical research and had not been found wanting.

After arranging a secret burial, Amanda took up lodging in another hotel in southern France and set out to enjoy three days of leisure. This was the time agreed on to allow Timothy to *cross over* and become adjusted to his new life. She spent most of her time indulging her crowning vice, eating. For three days she abandoned herself to the enjoyment of her enormous appetite, consuming quantities of food served in the hotel suite until her jaded palate craved more exotic fare. She then turned to gourmet restaurants, often traveling many miles to satisfy her tastes. The result was that she spent the fourth day in bed, ill with satisfaction.

At midmorning of the fifth day she made the first attempt to communicate with the departed Timothy Porterfield. There was no result, a fact she attributed to her outraged digestive system. Results were the same for the sixth, seventh and eighth days.

After drinking quantities of tea and munching dry toast, on the morning of the ninth day she seated herself with pad and pen in a large wing-back chair and waited. She had long graduated from the crudity of the ouija board. She leaned her head back, relaxed, and tried to rid her mind of all conscious distractions. As a result she went to sleep.

When she awoke about an hour later, she was vaguely conscious of some slight movement in her right hand. She took up the pen and waited. Yes, it was beginning, the familiar sensation of remoteness as the pen started to move in her hand. Timothy was coming through at last! *Hello, Amanda, I've had a helluva time breaking through . . . the vibrations here are terrific! . . . old critic here causing me some trouble . . . bloody scoundrel! . . . but everything all right now . . . will proceed as planned . . .* Then a long pause and several elliptical phrases describing his new life in rather satisfactory terms. The pen began to move with about the same speed she remembered Timothy dictating to his secretaries. The moving finger wrote: *Bridge to Tomorrow, a novel of suspense, by Timothy Porterfield, Chapter I* . . . and from there on the sluice gate opened, and Amanda felt as if she were being drowned with words. Page after page grew so rapidly that she found it a chore to read what was being written. Only after several hours did the writing suddenly stop with a spasmodic jerk of her hand. Then the following was scribbled almost illegibly on the paper: *enough . . .*

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must get used to vibrations here . . . break for chapter II . . .

Amanda was ready to break. Never before had she experienced such a fierce outpouring of energy in so short a span. Nothing could be more convincing to her that Timothy Porterfield had taken control. It was the same dynamic surge of energy she had observed in him during his earthly life, intensified several degrees.

She put aside the writing board and papers and raked her long straight hair behind her ears. Then she picked up the telephone and asked for the maître d'hôtel. She listened to the whole menu and ordered dinner in her room.

A month passed with hardly a day missed at the writing board. The manuscript mounted to the final and thirty-fifth chapter before the indefatigable Timothy wrote finis. Amanda then took a couple of days to prepare the manuscript for typing and promptly sent it off to secretary number one in New York.

But Timothy Porterfield, like the wicked who find no rest, pressed on and gave the hand of Amanda Cartwright no surcease. *A New Dimension* was begun and she was plunged into the creative paroxysm of still another chapter one.

Bridge to Tomorrow climbed up the best-seller list within its first few months of publication. But for Amanda the real pleasure was in banking the enormous royalty checks that began to come in. Authorized to draw on the Porterfield account, she now began to see larcenous vistas open before her. For a tempting moment it occurred to her that the entire posthumous fate of Timothy Porterfield rested in her hands. What, after all, was he without her?

But it was not Amanda's nature to dwell on such thoughts. Like a faithful disciple, she occupied herself month after month with Timothy's literary outpourings until *A New Dimension* was finished and off to secretary number two in Florida. And then, after only a brief respite, came the third volume, *More Worlds Than One.*

It was during the writing of this book that an event occurred which greatly upset Amanda, just after she had returned one evening from a day at the beach.

On her way through the lobby to the elevator she was hailed by the desk clerk, a sour little man with sallow skin who always spoke in a patronizing tone. "Miss Cartwright, one moment please—"

She went to the desk and waited while he signed in a middle-aged couple who acted like newlyweds. When he finished he turned to her, putting on a smile with mechanical precision. "There's a message for you. A phone call. The gentleman iden-

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tified himself only as Timothy. He would like you to call this number." He slid a small square of paper toward her.

Amanda quickly drew back her trembling hand as she picked up the paper. No, it was impossible, she thought. Surely he couldn't—he wouldn't use the telephone! As she started to the elevator she felt her heart throb in sickening protest that Timothy should treat her so.

In the room her first thought was to ignore the call. But she knew that would never do; Timothy would find a way to punish her. How inconsiderate of him. Tapping telephone lines, indeed!

Gloomily she picked up the phone and dialed the number on the slip of paper. A man's voice answered instantly, and as instantly she realized that it was not Timothy's voice. But it was a familiar voice, if only she could place it. And of all things the man wanted to play a guessing game, something that always infuriated her. *Don't you know who this is, Amanda? Have you forgotten so soon? Well, take a guess.* And then she knew.

"Wellington." She couldn't disguise her anger, even though she was at the same time relieved. She let him know unmistakably she didn't appreciate his little joke.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?" he laughed.

She spoke with enforced cordiality to this man she never liked.

"I'm fine, Amanda," the slightly sibilant voice replied. "I was down in these parts and thought I'd pay you a little visit."

Amanda thought desperately of some excuse to avoid him as she carried on the stream of small talk. But in the end she agreed to meet him that evening at a restaurant she suggested. Why, she wondered as she put down the phone, should he suddenly reappear with an air of friendliness he had never before shown her. Surely it was plain he wanted something.

At the restaurant she waited in a little foyer whose walls were covered from top to bottom with paintings. She sat opposite a large reclining nude whose thick, stark-white thighs reminded her painfully of her own. She scanned the other rows of paintings in search of a more pleasant subject.

"Amanda," a voice said and she turned to see Wellington grinding out a cigarette on the stone floor with his heel. Coming on him in the street she would probably not have recognized him, for she had seldom seen him out of his chauffeur's uniform. Slight of build with sunken cheeks like collapsed lungs, Wellington looked the part of a burlesque clown in his gaudy bright checkered jacket and rust-colored trousers. From his jacket pocket a monogrammed handkerchief cascaded like a fro-

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zen waterfall and a red string tie drooped from his collar. Altogether, Amanda thought as she eyed him incredulously, he looked like something out of a comic strip, and she was piqued that she must be seen with him in the restaurant.

His broad smile revealed tobacco-stained teeth. "You look good, Amanda. Like everything's going good for you."

"I'm fine, Wellington," It suddenly occurred to her that she wasn't sure whether this was his last or first name. She had never heard him called by any other name. "You look as though the world's been good to you."

His smile faded. "Looks are deceiving, Amanda."

Here it comes, she thought. Now for the touch. She moved quickly toward the door. "Shall we get a table?"

"Sure." He followed her into the restaurant.

She asked for a table in the corner where the light was the dimmest, and she was somehow surprised when he pulled out the chair for her. "Tell me, Wellington, what are you doing now?"

He settled into the chair across from her and fingered the menu idly. "Well, at the moment—" He abruptly took out a cigarette and lighted it. "Right now I guess you'd say I'm between jobs. I was with the races."

Translated, Amanda thought, he's a bookie down on his luck. She recalled his weakness for playing the horses.

When the waiter came for their orders, she noticed that her deliberation made him nervous, as if there were something much more pressing on his mind. It amused her, and she rather enjoyed watching him go through cigarette after cigarette while she took her time to choose.

After the waiter left with their orders, Wellington leaned back as if a great weight had been removed from him. "I see where *Bridge to Tomorrow* is really doing great. Last report I read said more'n a million copies already sold."

"How'd you like it?"

He looked puzzled.

"*Bridge to Tomorrow*. Did you like it?"

"Oh, sure. Thought it was great." He pulled out another cigarette. He lighted it and inhaled deeply. "Liked the whole thing. Great story."

A bald lie, Amanda thought; never read a word of it. Probably never read any of Timothy's books.

"What's the next one?" he asked absently.

"*A New Dimension*."

"When's it go to press?"

"Sometime this month."

"Great. Another best seller." He stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. "Sure's a lot of money, Amanda."

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Here it comes, she thought. Make him sweat out every larcenous word of his greedy desire. She nodded. "Quite a bit."

He squinted at her through a little smile, "And all yours. Right, Amanda?"

That struck a nerve in spite of all she could do. Her words jabbed back. "You know quite well, Wellington, Timothy made me executrix of the estate. You were there when it was done, all quite legal and official."

"Sure, Amanda, I know."

She looked squarely at him. "Why did you come back after all this time, Wellington? What do you want?"

"A little slice of the pie." He grinned. "I'm not greedy, Amanda. Just a little slice of a big pie."

"You were given your share once and for all," she snapped. "You signed papers agreeing to it."

"That's before the pie got so big," he said coolly. "Besides, papers don't mean nothing."

"They mean everything. For you, the simple difference between your freedom and jail. Oh, you can bet Timothy thought this whole thing through. He anticipated something like this and left documents proving—" She broke off and glared at him, no longer trying to conceal her contempt. "I suggest you give this matter a lot of thought, Wellington, before you say anything else."

"I have, Amanda, I have. More thought than you think." He leaned across the table, his face close to hers in deliberate confrontation. "You see I want some of that money. Want it real bad. And I've come up with the perfect answer to my problem."

"You've come up with blackmail."

"That's not a nice word for a lady to use, Amanda." He grinned into her face. "That's dirty talk."

Amanda felt the flush of rage in her cheeks. "If you think for one moment I'll stand for—"

"Now, Amanda, I don't see why old friends should get mad. You and—me." He leaned back and looked at her with smiling contempt—"You and me share a big secret, don't we? We know all about the great Timothy Porterfield, don't we? Like the old saying, you and me know dead men tell no tales, don't we, Amanda? Especially don't write books." He squinted at her through a screen of smoke. "Now, like I said, I'm not a greedy man. I don't mind you gettin' rich off Mr. Porterfield's name, writing them books and using his name—I don't mind that at all. I mind you not thinking about an old friend."

"You fool!" Amanda leaned forward, her dark eyes flashing, and uttered her suppressed rage through clenched teeth. "You think—you really think *I* write those books? You stupid fool—"

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Wellington laughed, a nasal, shaking laugh that drew looks from a nearby table. His eyes narrowed on her like two holes of a double-barreled gun. "You think for one minute I ever fell for that automatic hocus-pocus—whatever you claim to do! Damn, woman, you *must* think I'm stupid!" He snorted out a little laugh and pressed on. "But I really hand it to you—you're clever all right. You sure took the old man in good. You sliced out a nice piece of pie for yourself."

Amanda could feel her rage ebbing away; now suddenly all she wanted was to get him out of her sight. She promised herself not to lose her temper again. Nothing she could say would ever convince this fool that Timothy Porterfield was still alive, more vital than ever, writing his books through her. She must save her energies and think the thing through. There had to be a way to deal with Wellington. She wondered if Timothy was aware of the situation? If only he would help her find a way out.

She looked at Wellington as he studied her like some cornered prey. "All right," she said. "Tell me what you want."

"Now, Amanda, pleasure before business. Let's eat first and then I'll—"

"*Now,* Wellington—this very instant." She glared at him with all the coldness she felt. "Tell me what you want and be quick about it."

"No need to get so stirred up, Amanda. Let's talk about that after—"

Amanda pushed back her chair abruptly with a scraping sound.

"All right, all right—" He waved her down. "If you insist on being unfriendly—" He slipped a worn piece of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket and gazed at it for a moment. "Now, I figure if you was to write me a check every month—better make that cash—for, say, one thousand dollars." He never raised his eyes from the paper. "Yeah, I'd say a thousand's about right," he went on. "That's less'n five percent of what you're getting." He stopped again and looked at her. "Is that about right, Amanda?"

"Go on," she said icily.

"Well, I don't see how I can ask for less, seeing as how I'm a kind of silent partner, so to speak."

"What else?"

He gave her a look of feigned surprise. "Nothing else, Amanda. I'm being real generous 'cause you're a friend."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't call me your friend. Get on with your filthy business. What else? I want to know *all* your conditions."

"That's all, Amanda." He raised his hands in a gesture of persuasion. "Every month you have the cash for me"—he broke into a

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broad grin—"and I'll be around to remind you in case you forget."

Amanda reached in her purse and pulled out a hundred franc note. She threw it on the table in front of him. "Pay for the dinner. I'm leaving."

Amanda was already on her feet. She threw on her coat and moved briskly away.

"What about your food?"

"Eat it." She threw the words at him over her shoulder. "Pigs is pigs."

In her room again, Amanda thought and thought about the matter of Wellington. There had to be a way to deal with the scoundrel, a way that would never allow him the chance to betray Timothy Porterfield. It was obvious that he was not a man of intelligence, so she must outwit him, beat him at his own game and get him off her back forever. *Forever* rang in her mind like a bell, for she knew there would be no peace short of forever with Wellington.

For hours she lay awake staring at the moonlight shadows flitting across the window. Her mind raced on like a machine that couldn't stop until it finally drove her from the bed to the medicine cabinet. She found only a digestive palliative left over from her last food orgy and swallowed a quantity of it hopefully. But an hour later she was still awake.

As she watched the playing shadows of the window in open-eyed stupor, she suddenly became aware of someone, of something in the room. The feeling grew into a terror, for in spite of all her experience with the spirit world she had never in her life *seen* a spirit, a ghost. But something was there, an overpowering feeling of a presence she knew she would see if only she turned her head. She kept her eyes fastened on the shadowy window in an effort not to see it, but the feeling of the presence grew more intense, pulling at her with a power almost physical.

Even before her eyes focused on the presence she knew it was Timothy. He sat—or did he stand?—in a characteristic posture, his head resting lightly in his hand as if in profound thought. There could be no mistake; it was Timothy, diaphanous as he was. And with that certainty went some of her terror. She wanted to reach out to him, to call to him. But he gestured impatiently as if to prevent her, pointing with a gossamer hand across the room. His expression was urgent, commanding.

She sat upright in bed puzzling at his insistent gestures. And suddenly her tired brain understood that he was pointing to the large chair with the writing board resting on its arms. Of course, she accused herself silently, he wishes

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to speak to me in the only way he can. Quickly she threw off the covers and maneuvered her corpulent body out of the bed with all the speed she could. She seated herself in the chair and took the pen and board and readied herself. Even then he had disappeared as insubstantially as he had come. She clicked on the lamp and waited.

Immediately her hand was seized by a burst of energy and the pen wrote: *Fear not, dear Amanda, all will be well . . .* Then a long pause during which she wondered frantically if she were to be left with this meager assurance. Suddenly the pen moved again: *We are the watchers . . . we are many and we behold the iniquities of men . . . think not we are powerless to act in your dimension . . . by the next full moon he who troubles you shall tread no more your earthways . . . Suntreader . . .*

Amanda was suddenly seized with fear. This was not the familiar language of Timothy. Who was speaking to her, through her, in this archaic, oracular manner? Who was this intruder in the astral dust?

As though her fearful questions penetrated the planes, she then felt the comfortable movement of her hand and knew instinctively that Timothy was back again in control. She sighed relief at his welcome return. *Patience, Amanda . . . don't be afraid . . . we have friends who will help us . . . wise allies whose powers are greater than anything imagined on earth . . . trust us . . .*

The pen stopped and, although she waited patiently for more, nothing came. She dropped the pen wearily on the board. How could she trust anyone who called himself *Suntreader* and spoke in the hyperbole of a forgotten age. And did not these words speak of death for Wellington? But surely, the thought occurred to her with all its sickening horror, *they had not chosen her as the instrument of his death.*

Amanda's nerves were at the breaking point when the day arrived for Wellington to appear. What would he do when she told him there was no money? What desperate measures would the scoundrel take? Who could predict the turn of his twisted mind?

Amanda stayed in her room and held fast to her daily routine. She was awakened abruptly from her afternoon nap by a knocking at the door. When her senses focused she was seized by the scalding fear that it was Wellington. He had finally come and there was no escape now. She sat up stiffly on the bed as the knocking continued, the regular rapping of someone who seemed neither insistent nor desperate. She waited until the knocking stopped and

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she heard footsteps departing. Then she opened the door and found three newspapers, her daily fare, at her feet. She had forgotten the man who delivered the papers, two in French and one in English, every day. She picked them up and closed the door with a great sense of relief.

Except for a picture that caught her eye, she would have put the newspapers aside until after dinner as was her custom. The picture was of a horse, and she was curious as to its appearance on the front page. She read as she walked across the room and settled into a chair.

TRAGEDY AT
MAISONS-LAFITTE

Yesterday at this fashionable racetrack a tragic and unprecedented event occurred. A spectator was killed minutes after the last running of the day. Spectators report that the victim, identified as J. K. Wellington, was killed instantly when he jumped the fence and apparently attempted to pet the winning horse. It is assumed that possession of a winning ticket prompted the victim to this unusual action, thus frightening the animal and causing it to rear and strike the victim with its forefeet . . .

Amanda dropped the paper to her lap in utter unbelief. Could she be dreaming? She roused herself, picked up the paper again, and continued the thread of the story.

. . . the wealthy American owner of the horse, Mr. Howard T. Stockton, expressed regret for the accident and dismay at winning under such tragic circumstances. Speaking of his prize entry, Mr. Stockton said: "Suntreader has never demonstrated anything but the greatest gentleness . . ."

Amanda lowered the paper slowly to her lap and stared ahead. Laughter, compulsive and uncontrollable, rolled like thunder from her corpulent depths, shattering for a moment the stillness of the room. Poor old Wellington never had a chance. When she had all but given up, from beyond the reach of time and space there had come her answer. A score for Timothy.

Suddenly Amanda felt her hand, like a thing apart, seize a pen from the table next to her chair and move fiercely across the newspaper in her lap. It wrote: *The Watchers—a novel in a new dimension—by Timothy Porterfield . . . Chapter I . . . .*

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"We must give up our childish notions that the biological drives are the only ones of any importance," Professor Hornsby told his class. "There is one more pervasive, more persistent, and more profound than any of the biological drives—CURIOSITY!" The chance to prove his hypothesis came to the professor in the most astonishing fashion.

INVESTIGATING THE CURIOSITY DRIVE

by Tom Herzog

"CURIOSITY IS MAN'S MOST basic drive," Professor Hornsby said, pacing back and forth behind the lectern as scores of pencils raced madly across the pages of notebooks, preserving his thought for the night before the final exam. "The other so-called primitive drives, such as hunger, pain and sex, are mere nuisances that come and go, but curiosity is always lurking in the background, ready to take over when these transient influences have lost their sway. Rats will learn t-maze discriminations when their only reward is a chance to explore a more complicated maze. Monkeys will work at simple mechanical puzzles for hours with no reward other than the working of them. And this tendency to manipulate, to pry open, to peek into, seen in primitive form in the lower species, reaches its crowning glory in man, whose whole life may be characterized as one vast exploration, with time out to eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom."

Professor Hornsby paused to give the pencils a chance to catch up with him. Then he continued: "We can gauge the strength of this curiosity drive simply by depriving man of his opportunity to explore, by restraining him in one place and sealing off those most precious portals of exploratory in-

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formation, the sensory inputs. And what do we observe? Chaos. Cognitive disintegration. The ability to think logically is destroyed. Simple arithmetic problems cannot be solved. Perception is severely impaired. Bizarre hallucinations arise. Clearly, the fundamental status of the curiosity drive is established by these observations. We must give up our childish notions that the biological drives are the only ones of any importance. There is one more pervasive, more persistent, and more profound than any of the biological drives."

The professor paused for effect. Then he let them have it: "CURIOSITY!"

And laying his finger beside his nose, he turned and departed the lecture hall.

"Investigation is wadi's most basic urge," Gehosphat Pryxl said, slithering back and forth on the dais as scores of markers raced madly across recording spools, preserving his thought for the eve of the ultimate interrogation. "The other so-called primitive urges, such as food-bzzz, hurt-bzzz and heat-bzzz, are mere distractions that flick in and out, but investigation spreads perpetually behind all, ready to engage itself when these temporary inclinations have declined. Gerbies will master unichoice paths when their only contingent satisfaction is an opportunity to investigate multi-choice paths. Wumbies will task themselves with elementary undolox for several phases, with no contingent satisfaction other than the tasking. And this investigation urge, underdeveloped in subordinate organisms, realizes its full potential in wadi, whose whole existence may be described as one all-encompassing investigation, with intersperses of food-take, sleep-take, and leave-take."

Gehosphat Pryxl paused to give the markers a chance to catch up with him. Then he continued: "The potency of this investigation urge is measured simply by suspending wadi's ability to investigate, by isolating him without stimulus infeed. The effect? Disorder. Fractionation of thought. Ability to calculate destroyed. Encoding of stimulation impaired. False visions. Thus vividly do these findings impose the primacy of the investigation urge upon us. We must dispossess our infantile misconception that the organismic urges are the only ones worthy of consideration. There is one more extensive, more insistent, and more significant than any of the organismic urges."

The Gehosphat paused for effect. Then he womped them: "INVESTIGATION!"

And laying a tentacle beside his snout, he turned and slithered from the wisdom-take hall.

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"Man, you don't really believe that curiosity is the most fundamental drive, do you?" Professor Grundig asked.

"I most certainly do," Professor Hornsby replied.

"But the other drives are so much more insistent."

"Only in their season," Professor Hornsby said. "They come and go. But curiosity is always present. It never dies. It even penetrates the other drives. Curiosity about new foods is common. And I don't have to tell you about curiosity in sex."

"Ahem, well, yes," Professor Grundig said. "But it still seems to me that you're claiming rather a lot for curiosity."

"Consider a hypothetical case," Professor Hornsby said. "I assert that if we select any organism with a nervous system capable of sustaining behavior beyond the reflex level, provide it with sufficient food and water to satisfy its needs, and place it in a featureless room containing no objects except some strange-looking contraption, we can expect with full confidence that it will eventually exhibit exploratory behavior with regard to this contraption. I assert that the organism simply will not be able to prevent itself from doing so. And that, my friend, is the curiosity drive at work."

"Don't you think that your hypothetical organism will perceive the contraption as a possible source of danger and avoid it?" Professor Grundig objected.

"Perhaps at first," Professor Hornsby replied. "But eventually the organism's curiosity will get the better of it, and it will investigate. There can be no other outcome."

"I must say, you certainly are dogmatic," Professor Grundig said, smiling faintly.

"It cannot be so that the investigation urge out-urges all other urges," Gehosphat Frymdl declared.

"It is precisely so," Gehosphat Pryxl said. "Consider a possible situation: Select any organism with sufficient neural endowment to transcend strict sensory dominance of behavior. Isolate this organism in an environment devoid of all sources of stimulus complexity except a single unfamiliar machine. If the organism is supplied with sufficient sustenance, I assert that it must inevitably investigate the machine. Such behavior cannot be inhibited."

"This assertion would seem to be testable," Gehosphat Frymdl observed.

"It shall be done at no distant phase," Gehosphat Pryxl said. "We have been observing the perfect experimental organism for many metaphases. It occupies a fringe world near the edge of the star system. I will request immediate random selection of an organism

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from this world for our test. They are overmany, and one will not be missed. An appropriate machine for the test I have already constructed. Accompany me, and I will confront you with it."

"Deeply this engages me," Gehosphat Frymdl said.

Professor Hornsby was walking down a tree-lined campus street when he disappeared.

"Did you see that?" said a long-haired coed in hip boots and miniskirt. "A man just disappeared over there."

"You're confusing illusion with reality," her boyfriend said, scratching his beard.

Professor Hornsby awoke in a large featureless room, featureless, that is, except for a huge, strange-looking machine in its very center. The professor glanced at it, decided that its function was not immediately apparent, and then turned his attention to his own rather peculiar situation.

Only a moment ago, or so it seemed, he had been walking down a tree-lined campus street. Yet he had just awakened in a featureless room containing a strange machine and no other object except the exceedingly comfortable bed on which he lay. How was one to interpret this sequence of events?

His analytic mind supplied two hypotheses: (1) the tree-lined street was a dream from which he had just awakened, or (2) the featureless room was a dream upon which he had just embarked. Acceptance of the first hypothesis left him in the awkward position of explaining how he got himself into the featureless room in the first place. Acceptance of the second meant that he was now sleep-walking down a tree-lined campus street, a possibility which he immediately rejected as totally incompatible with his well-established sleeping habits.

"I think, therefore I am," Professor Hornsby said. Then he pinched himself hard and screamed, "Ouch!"

"It is firmly established that I am awake," he said. "Consequently, this room and this machine are not the stuff of dreams. Furthermore, I am reasonably certain that the tree-lined campus street was not a dream because I distinctly remember seeing a young woman wearing wading boots and an abbreviated skirt, and I haven't dreamed anything remotely comparable to that in over thirty years. Therefore, I shall tentatively accept a third hypothesis, that neither the tree-lined street nor this room are dreams. This means that the most intelligent thing I can do at the moment is to explore my environment in hope of finding out how I came to be here."

Professor Hornsby got up from

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the bed and approached the strange machine. Suddenly he stopped in mid-stride. In his mind, the following conversation was occurring: *"If we place our organism in a featureless room containing no objects except some strange-looking contraption, we can expect with full confidence that it will eventually exhibit exploratory behavior with regard to this contraption."*

"But don't you think that your hypothetical organism will perceive the contraption as a possible source of danger?"

"Well I'll be something or other!" Professor Hornsby said. "So that's it. I never would have thought Grundig had it in him. I don't know how he pulled it off, but it's magnificent. It's absolutely magnificent."

He returned to the bed and sat down. "When I see Grundig, I must find out how he managed to pluck me off the street and put me in this room without my even noticing it. But for the present, the main thing is to stay clear of that ridiculous machine. Grundig probably has it wired up to give me a colossal shock the moment I touch it. He has such a perverted sense of humor."

"Investigation appeared gravely probable," Gehosphat Frymdl said, turning away from the viewing screen. "But suddenly the organism redirected itself."

"Perhaps it requires food-take," Gehosphat Pryxl said.

As Professor Hornsby stared at the wall, a panel slid silently open revealing the most sumptuous turkey dinner he had seen since Thanksgiving.

"I must say, this is sporting of Grundig," Professor Hornsby said. "I *am* rather hungry."

Entering the alcove in the wall, he noticed that the table and chair therein were chained to the floor.

"He's not taking any chances on my augmenting the furniture out there," Professor Hornsby said. "I may steal the silverware just to spite him."

But the silverware, he now saw, was chained to the table. In fact, all the utensils were made of metal and were chained to the table. The chains appeared more decorative and less substantial than those attached to the table and chair, but he had no doubt that they were sufficiently strong for their intended purpose.

"Hmmmph," he said. "I can still steal a drumstick."

However, forty-five minutes later, when his stomach was full, he reflected that it would be rather childish to steal a drumstick. There were larger issues at stake. Evidently Grundig was bent on forcing him to investigate the strange machine and thus to vindicate his own theory. If Grundig was willing to accept an intellec-

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tual defeat of this magnitude, there could be only one reason: He was planning some monstrous practical joke at Hornsby's expense. He somehow had the situation rigged so that any exploratory behavior on Hornsby's part would prove acutely embarrassing.

"It sounds ridiculous," Professor Hornsby said, "but it must be so. Grundig is far too devious to throw a bone like this my way. He has an ace in the hole. He knew that I would remember our conversation, knew that my first impulse would be to run right over and investigate his machine. Consequently, to do so would be a mistake. I would be falling into some kind of trap, and Grundig would never let me live it down."

He got up from the table. "I won't do it. I will *not* do it. I'll make him squirm."

Thus resolved, Professor Hornsby emerged from the alcove, the wall panel sliding silently back into place behind him.

"Carefully observe," Gehosphat Pryxl said. "Now will the investigation urge make manifest itself."

"It is a matter that yet awaits resolution," Gehosphat Frymdl said.

—Now that his stomach was full, Professor Hornsby began to take note of his surroundings, and the first thing he noticed was the door at the far end of the room.

"I suppose it's locked," he said. "Otherwise I could just walk out of here and end this foolishness."

Nevertheless, he decided to give it a try, and to his surprise it was not locked. But neither was it an exit, as he discovered immediately upon opening it. It was the entrance to . . .

". . . a water closet," he said. "Well, at least I have all the comforts of home. But if this door is not a way out of the room, then how the devil did I get into the room in the first place?"

Immediately his mind supplied the answer. Sliding wall panels. There might well be many of them. It was impossible to tell from mere inspection of the walls.

"They must be remote-controlled," Professor Hornsby said. "Furthermore, Grundig must be monitoring my actions. There ought to be some sort of camera or one-way glass about somewhere."

He carefully inspected the ceiling of the room but could detect no sign of a viewing device. Similar inspection of the four walls turned up nothing. He returned to the bed and sat down.

"He must be watching me," Professor Hornsby said. "How else would he have known when to expose the turkey dinner? But I don't suppose I'll be able to find his viewing device. Those things can be ingeniously concealed."

Suddenly he was struck by an intriguing possibility.

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"I wonder if by any chance that ridiculous machine is some sort of monitoring instrument."

And so his attention focused on the machine for the first time since he had awakened. It stood, silent and masssive, in the center of the room.

"There can't be any harm in looking at it from a distance," he said.

From a distance it looked like a huge metallic cube with a ledge hanging out over the side facing his bed. That side appeared to contain some sort of control panel. He could not make out any details from where he sat.

"There can't be any harm in looking at it from a closer vantage point," Professor Hornsby said, rising from the bed and approaching the machine. He stopped about five feet away from it.

From this distance it was clear that the control panel contained a single feature of interest, a red button in its very center. The rest of it was simply a grille that might be part of a ventilation system. Or it might not. There was no way to determine its purpose from inspection. It was also clear that the overhanging ledge was not continuous with the top surface of the cube. Rather, it was a separate metal platform, supported at each end by metal girders that were attached to the sides of the cube in some manner not at all obvious. There were no braces or bolts; the girders simply seemed to adhere to the sides of the cube.

The professor wasted no time in puzzling over how the girders might be attached. He was not mechanically minded. Instead, he returned his attention to the red button.

"I shall not, under any circumstances, depresss that button," he promised himself. "That button is the focal point of the whole issue. Grundig is confident that curiosity eventually will get the better of me, and I'll depress it. The whole situation is structured toward that end. Consequently, if he has something up his sleeve, that red button is surely the instrument of his mischief. I will teach him a lesson in self-control. I will *not* depress that button."

So saying, Professor Hornsby returned to the bed and sat down.

"Most amazing is this organism's reserve," Gehosphat Pryxl said. "How does it submit to explanation?"

"Gravely imperiled is the primacy of the investigation urge by this organism's behavior," Gehosphat Frymdl said.

"Let us continue to persevere in observation," Gehosphat Pryxl said, waving a tentacle.

To take his mind off the irritating fact of the machine's presence, Professor Hornsby tried various diversions.

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"I'll plan tomorrow's lecture," he said. "Surely Grundig will let me out of here by then. Or is it already tomorrow?"

He glanced at his watch. It was nine-thirty. But was that a.m. or p.m.? How long had he slept in the room? Professor Hornsby now discovered that he had lost all sense of time.

"No matter," he said. "I'll plan my *next* lecture."

He would continue to develop the theme of the importance of curiosity in man by giving his students concrete examples of the drive's influence in everyday life. Curiosity in art. Curiosity in food. Curiosity in sex. Well, perhaps not sex. Things might get out of hand. Youthful minds could not approach that subject objectively. At any rate, he would wind it all up with his marvelous hypothetical case of a man confined in a featureless room containing no objects except for . . .

He found himself staring up at the overhanging ledge of the strange machine. It can't possibly be there to create shade, he told himself. There's no sunlight in here.

Abruptly he stood up and began pacing back and forth beside the bed. "This will never do. I must keep my mind off that silly machine. I know what I'll do. I'll take a nap."

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. He concentrated on breathing regularly. Soon he found himself in the left-field seats in Yankee Stadium. "Dat left fielder is a bum," the man next to him said. "I don't agree at all," he said. "In fact, I think I'll go right out there and congratulate him on the marvelous game he's playing." He arose from his seat, made his way down the aisle to the first row of boxes, climbed over the railing, and walked across the outfield toward the object of his praise. As he drew near, he was struck by what a remarkably flat head the left fielder had. It looked almost as if the visor of his cap was a mere extension of the top of his head. "I say, old man," the professor said. The left fielder turned toward him. The left fielder had no face. In the very center of where his face should have been was a single red button.

The professor awoke with a start. He was sweating.

"This is too much," he declared. "This is altogether too much."

He got up and began pacing back and forth beside the bed. "I know what I'll do. I'll write up that experiment I completed last week. Let's see here, I have a pen but no paper. That poses a slight problem. Hmmmm. I've got it! I'll write on the wall."

He walked over to the nearest wall and began to write out in longhand the results of his latest experiment with rats. He had

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demonstrated that rats spent less time eating in a cage that had a checkerboard pattern on the walls than in a cage that had no pattern on the walls. This, he intended to conclude, was due to the fact that the checkerboard pattern aroused their curiosity drive, which conflicted with the hunger drive, resulting in less time spent eating.

It was all so clear-cut and convincing that Professor Hornsby wrote effortlessly, paying only partial attention to the words that appeared on the wall. This was just what he needed. This took his mind completely off the—

Something about the last sentence he had written was not right. He focused his full attention on it. It read: These data demonstrate a significant relationship between the experimental variables and permit the conclusion that I will not, under any circumstances, depress that red button.

Angrily, he flung the pen away and stalked back over to the bed.

"What is this, some kind of conspiracy?" he cried. "Even my own unconscious mind gangs up against me."

He sat down on the bed, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I can't take much more of this. There must be something I can do that has no possible connection with that silly machine. I know what I'll do. I'll take this bed apart and see how it's made. There's no remotely conceivable way I can go wrong doing that."

He grabbed the pillow and removed the pillowcase. The pillow was covered with blue and white stripes. "Hmmmm. Very interesting."

He shook the pillow and listened carefully. "It doesn't rattle."

He threw the pillow and the pillowcase on the floor. He removed the quilt and the top sheet and deposited them on top of the pillowcase. He knelt and smelled the bottom sheet. "Delightful!"

He removed the bottom sheet and tosssed it on the pile of bedding.

"Aha! A mattress cover!" he said. "What could possibly lie beneath it?"

A knowing smile appeared on his face. "I predict a mattress. That's what I predict."

He clutched the mattress cover and tore it off. And there it was! A mattress! A mattress with rows of little depressions about six inches apart and in each little depression . . .

The knowing smile froze on his face. Then it broke up around the edges and disappeared, leaving him with a vacant glassy-eyed expression as he stared at the mattress with rows of little depressions about six inches apart and in the middle of each little depression a single red button.

Professor Hornsby erupted:

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"AAAAAGH! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

He pounded the mattress with his fists. He leaped to his feet and looked at the walls. They were covered with red buttons. So were the floor and ceiling.

"I can't stand it!" he shouted, staggering over to the machine with the overhanging ledge and the single red button.

"I can't stand it!" he shouted, depressing the button.

THWACK! The overhanging ledge plunged to the floor, squashing Professor Hornsby like a bug.

"Most objectively is the organism's behavior pattern described as cognitive disintegration attendant upon prolonged stimulus deprivation rather than manifestation of an investigation urge," Gehosphat Frymdl declared.

"I withhold agreement," Gehosphat Pryxl said. "More accurately is the organism's behavior pattern described as final dominance of an investigation urge previously suppressed by unknown causes. Recall the organism's early approaches toward the machine. Clearly did the investigation urge struggle to engage itself and finally succeed."

"Not clearly," Gehosphat Frymdl objected. "My explanation is not eliminated."

"It is so," Gehosphat Pryxl admitted. "A different experimental approach demands itself to discriminate between our explanations and to assure consensus in interpretation of results."

"You will then redirect your research efforts?"

"It is so."

"What will be your disposition of the machine you have constructed?" Gehosphat Frymdl asked. "Will it have no further application?"

"It is not necessary that it should pass into obscurity," Gehosphat Pryxl replied. "Material support for its production I will seek, that it may be made available to all wadi."

"Is that wise? Surely there will not be a demand for a machine without practical application."

"The machine will be sought after by many," Gehosphat Pryxl said with confidence.

"But what will be its functional role that the market should thus bear it?" Gehosphat Frymdl persisted.

"Always," Gehosphat Pryxl said knowingly, "is there room upon the market for a larger and more efficacious vombi trap."

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SCIENCE

A good deal of mail passes through our office on its way to Dr. Asimov, and it is quite a heady mixture of applause, postscript, query, advice and—occasionally—delighted correction. This series began in November 1958, and Dr. Asimov has not missed an issue since. Durability is something of a virtue in itself, but it is the consistent quality and variety of these essays that generates the mail and that gives us special pleasure in noting this tenth anniversary.

THE PLANETARY ECCENTRIC

by Isaac Asimov

SOME MONTHS AGO, MY WIFE AND I saw "Plaza Suite," a trilogy of three *very* funny one-act plays. We enjoyed them hugely in themselves, and we enjoyed them the more because the two leads were such favorites of ours and so good.

There are very few people who are not just a little star-struck, of course, and my wife has a feeling hidden deep within her that she can use me as a tool with which to meet those few certain stars that strike her. After all, she reasons, if one of them is a science fiction fan, and if I walk boldly up and introduce myself—

The one catch is that I refuse to lend myself to this. After all, what if they are *not* science fiction fans? Think of the humiliation!

So, I left the theater, holding her elbow firmly and ignoring her plaintive plea that I make my way backstage and announce my magic name. We went to the restaurant next door instead for a cup of coffee while she glared daggers at me. —And then the waitress told us in great excitement that the entire company of "Plaza Suite" was in that same restaurant.

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Can I fight Fate? I sighed and removed my napkin. "All right," I said, resignedly, "I'll chance it."

I walked over with a charming smile, handed over my program booklet for autographs and casually introduced myself, pronouncing each syllable of my name with the greatest care. Needless to say, I bombed completely. There was no sign that any one of the crowd at the table had heard of me and as I drew back in chagrin, someone suddenly rose and dashed forward, shouting, "Gertie!"

My wife looked startled, then cried out, "Nate!" and, behold, they were grabbing at each other excitedly. Nate was her first cousin whom she hadn't seen in many years, and he was right there at the table. She didn't need me at all. She had a great time while I stood to one side, shifting from foot to foot and experiencing, but not enjoying, my unaccustomed role as husband-of-the-celebrity.

But we should all learn from our misfortunes and humiliations, and to me it was just another case of getting practice in shifting viewpoints. The Universe does *not* revolve about me. (I forget how many separate times I've very temporarily learned that.)

And it doesn't revolve about us, collectively, either, even though you'd never guess it from a casual glance at our astronomy texts.

For instance, any text will tell you how long it takes Jupiter to go around the Sun—a little under 12 years. And do they say: a little under 12 *Earth*-years? No, they don't.

As it happens, Jupiter goes around the Sun in one year by definition: one *Jupiter*-year. Of course, that sort of thing gives us very little information. Every planet goes around its primary in exactly one planet-year, and that tells us nothing. We use the Earth-year as an arbitrary standard (convenient for ourselves) in order to compare periods readily.

But I wish, just once in a while, to see the matter explained straightforwardly, instead of having it all assumed so casually as to give the beginner the notion that what we call a "year" is an absolute length of time of cosmic significance instead of being a mere accident of astronomy.

Here's something else. If Jupiter's period of revolution is 11.862 Earth-years long, does it not follow that it is 4,332 days long?

Yes, in a way, but it is 4,332 *Earth*-days long. And in this case, our self-centeredness would deprive us of information. To give the period in *Earth*-days gives us nothing new as opposed to giving it in *Earth*-years. Why don't we instead give the period of Jupiter's revolu-

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tion in *Jupiter*-days? That would give us something of astronomic value. It would tell us the number of times the planet rotates on its axis while it makes one revolution about the Sun.

I have never seen a table that gives the number of planet-days in a planet-year for each of the planets of the Solar system (which doesn't mean such a table doesn't exist somewhere, of course), so I'll prepare one (see Table 1), omitting Mercury and Venus as special cases with unusual rotations (see DANCE OF THE SUN, F & SF, April 1968 and BACKWARD, TURN BACKWARD, F & SF, May 1968).

As you see from the table, there are 10,560 Jupiter-days in a Jupiter-year, as compared with only 4,332 Earth-days. You may deduce from this, and quite rightly, that the individual Jupiter-day is less than half as long as the individual Earth-day.

Table 1

Planet	*Period of Revolution in Earth-years*	*Period of Revolution in Planet-days*
Earth	1.000	365
Mars	1.881	670
Jupiter	11.862	10,560
Saturn	29.458	25,180
Uranus	84.018	68,130
Neptune	164.78	91,500
Pluto	248.4	14,192

The thing that catches the eye at once, though, in Table 1 is that the number of planet-days in Pluto's planet-year is extraordinarily low. Pluto has the longest period of revolution by far, yet has little more than half the number of planet-days in its year that Saturn has, and Saturn has a period only an eighth that of Pluto.

There's no mystery to this, and I won't pretend to keep you in suspense. Pluto simply has an unusually long rotational period. This is surprising, too, considering that it is enormously far from the Sun and cannot, therefore, have been affected by the slowing effects of Solar tides as Mercury and Venus were.

In Table 2, I list the rotational periods of the planets beyond Venus. Clearly, something is wrong with Pluto. In fact, we can make

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that stronger. Everything is wrong with Pluto, and has been ever since it was discovered back in 1930.

Table 2

Planet	*Period of rotation (Earth-days)*
Earth	1.000
Mars	1.026
Jupiter	0.410
Saturn	0.426
Uranus	0.451
Neptune	0.66
Pluto	6.4

As early as 1905, the American astronomer, Percival Lowell, had decided there must be some planet beyond Neptune (then the farthest known planet) to account for the fact that there were some small anomalies in Uranus's orbit. After all the gravitational effects of the other known planets* had been taken into account, something was left over.

Lowell calculated the orbit and mass such a planet would have to have to account for Uranus's departure from its "proper" motion and figured out where it would have to be at that moment. He looked for it in that place, then all around that place, and didn't find it. By the time of his death in 1916, he still hadn't found it.

The fact that he didn't find it didn't necessarily mean it wasn't there. "Planet X," as Lowell called it, would have to be farther from us and more distant from the Sun, too, than any other planet was. Consequently, it would be dimmer than the other planets, and an attempt to gather enough light to see it would also bring into view an extraordinary number of stars, against which it might well be lost.

Unless Planet X would be large enough to show a visible globe in the telescope, it would have to be detected by its motion against the background of stars, and here there was another catch. Since Planet X was so far from the Sun, it would be moving more slowly in its orbit under the lash of the distant Sun's feeble gravity. Spotting its slow motion would not be easy.

* *Including Neptune, which was itself discovered as a result of Uranus's anomalous motions—but that is another story.*

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In 1929, a young man, Clyde W. Tombaugh, began work at Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona (which Lowell himself had had built) and became involved in the search. He used a technique in which he photographed the same small part of the sky on two different days. Each picture would have from 50,000 to 400,000 stars in it. If all the stars were really stars, the two pictures should be completely identical. If one of the stars were really a planet, then that one spot of light representing it would have moved slightly during the intervals between photographs.

Tombaugh had the two plates projected alternately on a screen and adjusted them to have star images coincide. He then continued to project the images in quick alternation and began studying the picture painstakingly, area by area. Anything that was not a star would flick back and forth as the images alternated, and eventually that tiny flicker of shifting light would catch the eye. But it would have to flick back and forth only a small distance, for anything else that would be a non-star would move more quickly than Planet X.

On February 18, 1930, after almost a year of painstaking comparisons, Tombaugh found a flickering object in the constellation Gemini. For a month he followed that object and was then able to announce confidently that Planet X had been discovered. The announcement came on March 13, 1930, which would have been Lowell's seventy-fifth birthday if he had lived. Furthermore, the planet was named Pluto (a good name for a planet that swung so far from the light-giving Sun), and it was no accident that the first two letters of the name are the initials of Percival Lowell.

It was a great triumph for Lowell's memory, but the fact of the discovery was all the triumph there was. From that point on, everything went wrong.

In the first place, when its orbit was calculated, it turned out to be unexpectedly lopsided. The orbit departed further from perfect circularity and was more distinctly elliptical than was true for any other planet.

The ellipticity of an orbit (or of an abstract ellipse, for that matter) is given by a value called the "eccentricity." A circle has an eccentricity of 0 and an ellipse that is flattened into a straight line or elongated infinitely into a parabola has an eccentricity of 1. All ordinary ellipses have eccentricities between 0 and 1. For instance, the eccentricity of Earth's orbital ellipse is only 0.0168 which means that by casual inspection it couldn't be distinguished from a circle.

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If a planet's orbit were a perfect circle, the Sun would be located at the exact center, and the planet would be at the same distance from the Sun in every part of its orbit. When, however, a planetary orbit is elliptical, the Sun is located at one focus of the ellipse and this focus is displaced from the center of the ellipse. (It is this displacement which gives us the word "eccentric" which is from Greek words meaning "out of center.") The greater the eccentricity, the greater the displacement of the focus and the flatter, or more elongated, is the ellipse.*

This means that a planet moving around its orbit is closer to the Sun when it is on the side of the focus occupied by that body and farther when it is on the opposite side. There is therefore a point at one end of the major axis where the planet is at its closest to the Sun ("perihelion") and another point at the other end of the major axis where it is at its farthest ("aphelion"). Thus, the Earth is 91.4 million miles from the Sun at perihelion and 94.6 million miles from it at aphelion. The difference in distance is 3,200,000 miles.

If the Earth's orbit were larger but retained the same eccentricity, the difference in extreme distances would be larger, too, but only in proportion. On the other hand, a greater eccentricity would make for a greater difference in extreme distances even if the average distance remained the same.

In other words, the difference in distance from the Sun, between perihelion and aphelion, is a measure of two things, the eccentricity of the planet's orbit, and its average distance from the Sun.

It so happens that Pluto is not only the farthest planet from the Sun, but it also has the most eccentric orbit. Usually these facts are presented in two separate columns, but I will give another column that combines the two facts to show you how enormous the effect is for Pluto (see Table 3).

You can see from the table that Pluto is nearly two billion miles closer to the Sun at some points in its orbit than at others. Since Pluto is less than a billion miles farther from the Sun, *on the average,* than Neptune is, you can further see that with Pluto swooping nearly a billion miles farther out than its average and nearly a billion miles closer in than that same average, it is bound to approach the Sun more closely than Neptune at some points in its orbit.

** There is a second focus, equally displaced, on the other side of the center along the "major axis"; that is, the long-ways diameter of the ellipse. In a circle, with an eccentricity of 0, the two foci fall exactly upon the center. All three are represented by a single point.*

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Table 3

Planet	*Mean distance (millions of miles)*	*Eccentricity of orbit*	*Perihelion-aphelion difference in distance (millions of miles)*
Mercury	36	0.206	15
Venus	67	0.007	0.9
Earth	93	0.017	3.2
Mars	142	0.093	25
Jupiter	484	0.048	47
Saturn	887	0.056	103
Uranus	1790	0.047	168
Neptune	2800	0.009	48
Pluto	3680	0.249	1800

And so it does! At the present moment Pluto is moving toward its perihelion when it will be only 2766 million miles from the Sun. That point will be reached in 1989, and it will then be something like 35 million miles closer to the Sun than Neptune will be. In fact, it will be closer to the Sun than Neptune will be through the entire range of years from 1979 to 1998. In that period, Neptune will be, temporarily, the most distant planet from the Sun.

Lowell had allowed for a certain eccentricity of the orbit of Planet X in order to make his figures come out right, but he didn't count on *that* much eccentricity.

When Pluto crosses Neptune's orbit in 1979 on its way inward, or in 1998 on its way outward, might it not collide with Neptune? Or if Neptune is in another part of its orbit then, might there not come a moment when the two planets approach the crossing point at the same time and have a catastrophic encounter?

From the usual picture of the Solar system, we might think so, for it shows the orbit of Pluto making a shallow short cut across the orbit of Neptune in the neighborhood of Pluto's perihelion. However, the usual Solar system diagram is a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional phenomenon.

If you could view the planetary orbits from the side, you would

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see they are slanted at different directions. This slanting is usually defined by the angle of the plane of a particular planetary orbit and the plane of the Earth's orbit ("inclination to the ecliptic").

When a planet circles in an orbit so tipped, it is a given number of miles above the ecliptic at one end (at a point 90° from the place of crossing) and the same number of miles below it at the other end. This number of miles depends on both the size of the angle and the size of the orbit. Again, Pluto has both the largest inclination and the largest orbit, so that the results are spectacular (see Table 4).

Table 4

Planet	*Inclination (degrees)*	*Maximum distance from the ecliptic (millions of miles)*
Mercury	7.0	5.3
Venus	3.4	4.0
Earth	0.0	0.0
Mars	1.9	3.3
Jupiter	1.3	11.5
Saturn	2.5	41.0
Uranus	0.8	26.2
Neptune	1.8	88.5
Pluto	17.1	1340

Pluto wanders enormous distances above and below the ecliptic. No other planetary body can even faintly compare with it in this respect.

If Neptune and Pluto crossed the ecliptic at the same point and if that point just happened to be where Pluto crossed Neptune's orbit in the usual two-dimensional projection, then, yes, they would eventually collide. But such a coincidence would be fantastically improbable and it didn't take place. The points at which Neptune and Pluto cross the ecliptic are well separated, the closer pair (there are four crossing points altogether for the two planets) being over a billion miles apart, and none of the four being near the two-dimensional crossing point. This means that when Pluto's orbit seems to be cutting across Neptune's orbit in a two-dimensional diagram, the two orbits are many millions of miles apart in the third dimension.

With Pluto following so enormously deviant an orbit, is it possible

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that it can produce the effects on Uranus's orbit that Lowell had calculated under the assumption that the planet had a much more respectable orbit? The key to the answer lies in the mass of the planet.

To produce the effects on Uranus from the goodly distance at which Lowell expected Planet X to be, the new planet would have to be something like 6⅔ times as massive as Earth.

This is not in itself unlikely. The mass of Jupiter is 318 times that of Earth and the corresponding figures for the other three giants as we move outward from the Sun are 95, 15, and 17. Even allowing for a decline in mass as we move outward, should not Planet X have a mass of at least 6⅔ times that of Earth?

If a planet as dense as Neptune had a mass 6⅔ times that of Earth, it would have to have a diameter of 22,000 miles. If Pluto had this diameter and if it reflected 54 percent of the light it received from the Sun, as Neptune does, then, even at its aphelion distance, Pluto would have a magnitude of 10.3 compared with Neptune's 7.6.*

That is dim enough, heaven knows, but when Pluto was discovered it was considerably fainter than this even though it was considerably closer than its aphelion point. Even at perihelion its magnitude would be 13.6 and at aphelion it would dim further to 15.9. In other words Pluto was about 1/170 as bright as it ought to be.

To explain that, we must suppose that either Pluto is considerably smaller than 22,000 miles in diameter, and therefore catches less Sunlight than we have assumed, or that it reflects considerably less of the Sunlight than it receives. —Or both.

A small diameter would make it look bad, for then Pluto would be less likely to be sufficiently massive. Low reflectivity would mean little or no atmosphere (which is what does most of the reflecting) and this would indicate a small gravitational field, hence a small mass.

This was something that could be understood at the instant of discovery, but it was the result of indirect reasoning. Could astronomers actually *measure* the diameter of Pluto?

Unfortunately, even large telescopes did not seem to magnify Pluto sufficiently to make it appear as a distinct little sphere. It remained nothing but a point of light (a bad sign of smallness in itself) for a quarter of a century after its discovery. This did not deprive astronomers of all information. At Lowell Observatory (where Pluto had been discovered) Robert H. Hardie and M. Walker detected small regular fluctuations in brightness in 1955 and from this they argued

** The higher the magnitude, the dimmer the object. Any object with a magnitude over 6 is too dim to be seen by the unaided eye.*

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that the planet rotated in 6 days 9 hours. In 1964, Hardie sharpened the figure to 6 days, 9 hours, 16 minutes, 54 seconds or almost exactly 6.4 days (the figure I used in Table 2).

But at last in 1956, the Dutch-American astronomer, Gerard P. Kuiper, managed to produce a disc by looking at Pluto through the 200-inch telescope. From the size of the disc and the distance of Pluto, Kuiper decided that Pluto had a diameter of 3,600 miles, which made it not very much larger than Mercury.

So small a planet could not possibly have the mass required to produce the effect on Uranus's orbit that Lowell had predicted. If Pluto had the density of Earth (the densest planet in the Solar system), it would have a mass of only about 0.1 that of Earth. In order for it to have the required 6⅔ times Earth's mass, it would have to be over 60 times as dense as the Earth or some fifteen times as dense as platinum, which is flatly impossible.

Besides, the low-mass hypothesis is further upheld by the fact that Pluto would then have no atmosphere to speak of and it might reflect no more of the light than our Moon does (say only 6 percent of the Sunlight that falls on it). It is the combination of small size and low reflectivity that accounts for the unusual dimness of the planet.

What is needed is a direct mass-determination, but this cannot be made. If Pluto had a satellite, such a determination could be made in a matter of weeks, but it doesn't—at least none that we can detect.

Failing that, can there be anything wrong with Kuiper's size determination? One theory that was advanced was that Pluto might be completely ice-covered and might reflect the Sun so sharply that what we really see is the Sun's image, as though in a fuzzy mirror, and not the planet itself at all. This would mean that the planet was considerably larger than the image and might have the necessary mass.

Then an unusual chance to settle the matter came up. The Canadian astronomer, Ian Halliday, pointed out that Pluto was going to pass very close to a faint star on the night of April 28, 1965; so close in fact that it might actually pass in front of it and obscure it. If so, astronomers in different observatories, knowing how quickly Pluto moves, could compare notes on the length of time during which the star was hidden and from that calculate the true diameter of Pluto in a way that did not depend upon reflection of sunlight at all.

Came the great day and the star never disappeared! A dozen different observations in North America agreed that the star remained visible throughout the period during which Pluto was in its neighborhood. Pluto had missed the star altogether!

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If one calculated Pluto's exact position, however, it turned out that the planet had passed very close to the star, and in order to miss the star, Pluto's globe had to be quite small. The diameter, by those calculations, would have to be less than 3600 miles, and Kuiper's original figures seem confirmed.

Astronomers must, however reluctantly, accept Pluto as a dim planet, because it is a little one, and therefore non-massive, and therefore unable to account for the anomalies in Uranus's motions.

It follows, then, that Pluto is *not* the Planet X that had its orbit calculated by Lowell. It is an entirely different body that was discovered by the coincidence that it happened to be located within several degrees of the place where Lowell's figures had told Tombaugh to look.

So we are left with two questions. First, where is Planet X? Surely something is causing the perturbations in Uranus's orbit. Shouldn't astronomers do a little re-calculating and re-looking? Something fairly sizable may be out there.

The other question is: How do we account for Pluto and its eccentricities. It is completely different from the other outer planets in its orbital extremism, its mass, diameter, and its period of rotation.

Can it be that Pluto is not really a planet, but had once been a satellite? It is larger than the other satellites of the Solar system, but not much more so in some cases. Neptune itself has a satellite, Triton, which is about 2600 miles in diameter. Pluto would be only 2.5 times as massive as Triton if both were of equal densities.

Pluto comes suspiciously close to Neptune's orbit. Could it once have been a satellite of Neptune? If so, it would have probably faced one side eternally to its primary (as our Moon does). In that case, Pluto's present rotational period of 6.4 days would have represented the period of its rotation about Neptune. In order to revolve about Neptune in that period it would have had to be at a distance of 240,000 miles from the planet—a most reasonable distance.

Triton, Neptune's actual satellite, is only 220,000 miles from Neptune and revolves about that planet in 5.9 days. Actually, if Triton and Pluto both revolved about Neptune, they would be uncomfortably close to each other.

But there is something funny about Triton. It revolves about Neptune with an inclination of 160°; that is, in the retrograde direction (see BACKWARD, TURN BACKWARD, F & SF, May 1968).

In an article I wrote several years ago (BEYOND PLUTO, July 1960) I suggested, from this one fact, that Triton was not always a

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satellite of Neptune but had been captured at some date in the past. Can it possibly be that the dynamics of the capture of Triton was such that Pluto, which had previously been Neptune's satellite, had been cast into outer space and made into an independent planet? Is that why Pluto's orbit is so eccentric and so inclined and why it homes back toward Neptune's orbit at every revolution?

Since my speculation, new evidence has arisen—

First, it so happens that when a satellite moves about a planet in a retrograde fashion, while the planet itself rotates on its axis directly, tidal effects cause the satellite to move slowly closer to the planet.

In 1966, Thomas B. McCord of the California Institute of Technology calculated Triton's future and has decided that Triton may (in theory) crash on Neptune some time between 10 and 1000 million years from now. Actually, before it could really approach Neptune's surface, gravitational forces would have broken Triton into fragments. Our remote descendants would then see a second planet with rings, and since Triton is more massive than the material in Saturn's rings, Neptune would end up with a far more spectacular set.

Working backward, of course, we can see that Triton must have been further and further away from Neptune as we move farther into the past. McCord speculates that Triton may have been so far away long ago as not to have been part of Neptune's system at all. Triton would then have been captured by Neptune long ago.

And when it was captured, did it knock out Pluto? There are, alas, objections to that pretty picture. Pluto does not really come very close to Neptune after all, if the Solar system is viewed three-dimensionally, as I explained earlier.

To be sure, further gravitational influences on Pluto since the catastrophe may well have altered Pluto's orbit still more—but *that* much?

In 1964, astronomers at the U.S. Naval Weapons Laboratory calculated Pluto's orbit backward for 120,000 years to see if various gravitational influences of other planets might have had it significantly closer to Neptune in the past.—They did not!

But that still leaves Planet X. I think there is a good chance Planet X may be out there somewhere, perhaps at the other end of Pluto's eccentric orbit. If Planet X can be found and its gravitational influences taken into account and Pluto's orbit calculated back for millions of years rather than merely thousands, why, who knows? It may turn out that the various puzzles of Pluto so frustrating now will fall into neat place, once one more planet is taken into account.

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Fred Saberhagen sold his first story in 1961 and has added about 20 since then, plus five books. "In an autobiog blurb I wrote about four years ago, I stated that my leisure activities included chess, karate, and looking out for the right girl. To update this, let me say that I am playing in the Greater Chicago Open (chess); that I have temporarily forsworn karate (which is a lot of hard work for non-fictional people); and that, having found the Right Girl at last, I am displaying uncharacteristic good sense and marrying her." His first story for us concerns a man who finds another Right Girl—but at the wrong time . . .

YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALF-DOOR

by Fred Saberhagen

THAT FIRST NIGHT THERE WAS A police vehicle, what I think they call a K-9 unit, in the little employees' lot behind the Institute. I parked my car beside it and got out. The summer moon was dull above the city's air, but floodlights glared at a small door set in the granite flank of the great building. I carried my toolbox there, pushed a button, and stood waiting.

Within half a minute, a uniformed guard appeared inside the reinforced glass of the door. Before he had finished unlocking, two uniformed policemen were standing beside him, and beside them a powerful leashed dog whose ears were aimed my way.

The door opened. "Electronic Watch," I said, holding out my identification. The dog inspected me, while the three uniformed men peered at my symbols and were satisfied.

With a few words and nods the police admitted me to fellowship. In the next moment they were saying goodbye to the guard. "It's clean here, Dan, we're gonna shove off."

The guard agreed they might as well. He gave them a jovial farewell and locked them out, and then turned back to me, still smiling, an

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old and heavy man, now adopting a fatherly attitude. He squinted with the effort of remembering what he had read on my identification card. "Your name Joe?"

"Joe Ricci."

"Well, Joe, our system's acting up." He pointed. "The control room's up this way."

"I know, I helped install it." I walked beside the guard named Dan through silent passages and silent marble galleries, all carved by night lights into one-third brilliance and two-thirds shadow. We passed through new glass doors that were opened for us by photocells. Maintenance men in green unifoms were cleaning the glass; the white men among them were calling back and forth in Polish.

Dan whistled cheerfully as we went up the wide four-branched central stair, passing under a great skylight holding out the night. From the top landing of the stair, a plain door, little noticed in the daytime, opens through classical marble into a science-fiction room of fluorescent lights and electronic consoles. In that room are three large wall panels, marked Security, Fire, and Interior Climate. As we entered, another guard was alone in the room, seated before the huge security panel.

"Gallery two-fifteen showed again," the seated guard said in a faintly triumphant voice, turning to us and pointing to one of the indicator lights on the panel. The little panel lights were laid out within an outline of the building's floor plan. "You'd swear it was someone in there."

I set down my kit and stood looking at the panel, mentally reviewing the general layout of the security circuitry. Electronic Watch has not for a long time used anything as primitive as photocells, which are relegated to such prosaic jobs as opening doors. After closing hours in the Institute, when the security system is switched on, invisible electric fields permeate the space of every room where there is anything of value. A cat cannot prowl the building without leaving a track of disturbances across the Security panel.

At the moment all its indicators were dim and quiet. I opened my kit, took out a multimeter and a set of probes, and began a preliminary check of the panel itself.

"You'd swear someone's in two-fifteen when it happens," said the guard named Dan. Standing close and watching me, he gave a little laugh. "And then a man starts over to investigate, and before he can get there it stops."

Of course there was nothing nice and obvious wrong with the panel. I had not expected there would be; neat simple troubles are too much to expect from the complexities of modern electronic gear. I tapped the indicator marked 215 but its glow remained dim and

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steady. "You get the signal from just the one gallery?" I asked.

"Yeah," said the guard in the chair. "Flashing a couple times, real quick, on and off. Then it stays on steady for a while, like someone's just standing in the middle of the room over there. Then like he said, it goes off while a man's trying to get over there. We called the officers and then we called you."

I put the things back in my kit and closed it up and lifted it. "I'll walk over there and look around."

"You know where two-fifteen is?" Dan had just unwrapped a sandwich. "I can walk over with you."

"That's all right, I can find it." I delayed on my way out of the room, smiling back at the two guards. "I've been here in the daytime, looking at the pictures."

"Oh. You bring your girl here, hey?" The guards laughed, a little relieved that I had broken my air of grim intentness. I know I often strike people that way.

Walking alone through the half lit halls, I found it pleasant to think of myself as a man who came there in two such different capacities. Electronics and art were both in my grasp. I had a good start at knowing everything of importance. Renaissance Man, I thought, of the New Renaissance of the Space Age.

Finding the gallery I wanted was no problem, for all of them are numbered plainly, more or less in sequence. Through rising numbers, I traversed the Thirteenth Century, the Fourteenth, the Fifteenth. A multitude of Christs and virgins, saints and noblemen, watched my passage from their walls of glare and shadow.

From several rooms away I saw the girl, through a real doorway framing the painted one she stands in. My steps slowed as I entered gallery two-fifteen. About twenty other paintings hang there, but for me it was empty of any presence but hers.

That night I had not thought of her until I saw her, which struck me then as odd, because on my occasional daytime visits I had always stopped before her door. I had no girl of the kind to take to an art gallery, whatever the guards might surmise.

The painter's light is full only on her face, and on her left hand, which rests on the closed bottom panel of a divided door. She is leaning very slightly out through the half-open doorway, her head of auburn curls turned just an inch to her left but her eyes looking the other way. She watches and listens, that much is certain. To me it has always seemed that she is expecting someone. Her full, vital body is chaste in a plain dark dress. Consider her attitude, her face, and wonder that so much is made of the smile of Mona Lisa.

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The card on the wall beside the painting reads:

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN
DUTCH 1606-1669 dated 1645
YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALF-DOOR

She might have been seventeen when Rembrandt saw her, and seventeen she has remained, while the faces passing her doorway have grown up and grown old and disappeared, wave after wave of them.

She waits.

I broke out of my reverie, at last, with an effort. My eye was caught by the next painting, Saftleven's *Witches' Sabbath,* which once in the daylight had struck me as amusing. When I had freed my eyes from that I looked into the adjoining galleries, trying to put down the sudden feeling of being watched. I squinted up at the skylight ceiling of gallery two-fifteen, through which a single glaring spotlight shone.

Holding firmly to thoughts of electronics, I peered in corners and under benches, where a forgotten transistor radio might lurk to interfere, conceivably, with the electric field of the alarm. There was none.

From my kit I took a small field-strength meter, and like a priest swinging a censer I moved it gently through the air around me. The needle swayed, as it should have, with the invisible presence of the field.

There was a light gasp, as of surprise. A sighing momentary movement in the air, something nearby come and gone in a moment, and in that moment the meter needle jumped over violently, pegging so that with a technician's reflex my hand flew to switch it to a less sensitive scale.

I waited there alone for ten more minutes, but nothing further happened.

"It's working now; I could follow you everywhere you moved," said the guard in the chair, turning with assurance to speak to me just as I re-entered the science-fiction room. Dan and his sandwich were gone.

"Something's causing interference," I said, in my voice the false authority of the expert at a loss. "So. You never have any trouble with any other gallery, hey?"

"No, least I've never seen any—well, look at that now. Make a liar out of me." The guard chuckled without humor. "Something showing in two-twenty-seven now. That's Modern Art."

Half an hour later I was creeping on a catwalk through a clean crawl space above gallery two-twenty-seven, tracing a perfectly healthy microwave system. The reflected glare of night lights below filtered up into the crawl space, through a million holes in acoustical ceiling panels.

A small bright auburn move-

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ment, almost directly below me, caught my eye. I crouched lower on the catwalk, putting my eyes close to the holes in one thin panel, bringing into my view almost the whole of the enormous room under the false ceiling.

The auburn was in a girl's hair. It came near matching the hair of the girl in the painting, but that could only have been coincidence, if such a thing exists. The girl below me was alive in the same sense I am, solid and fleshly and three-dimensional. She wore a kind of stretch suit, of a green shade that set off her hair, and she held a shiny object raised like a camera in her hands.

From my position almost directly above her, I could not see her face, only the curved grace of her body as she took a step forward, holding the shiny thing high. Then she began another step, and halfway through it she was gone, vanished in an instant from the center of an open floor.

Some time passed before I eased up from the strain of my bent position. All the world was silent and ordinary, so that alarm and astonishent would have seemed out of place. I inched back through the crawl space to my borrowed ladder, climbed down, walked along a corridor and turned a corner into the vast shadow-and-glare of gallery two-two-seven.

Standing in the brightly lit spot where I had seen the girl, I realized she had been raising her camera at a sculpture—a huge, flowing mass of bronze blobs and curved holes, on the topmost blob a face that looked like something scratched there by a child. I went up to it and thumped my knuckles on the nearest bulge of bronze, and the great thing sounded hollowly. Looking at the card on its marble base I had begun to read—RECLINING FIGURE, 1957—when a sound behind me made me spin round.

Dan asked benignly: "Was that you raising a ruckus in here about five minutes ago? Looked like a whole mob of people was running around."

I nodded, feeling the beginning of a strange contentment.

Next day I awoke at the usual time, to afternoon sunlight pushing at the closed yellow shades of my furnished apartment, to the endless street noises coming in. I had slept well and felt alert at once, and I began thinking about the girl.

Even if I had not seen her vanish, it would have been obvious that her comings and goings at the Institute were accomplished by no ordinary prowlers' or burglars' methods. Nor was she there on any ordinary purpose; if she had stolen or vandalized, I would most certainly have been awakened early.

I ate an ordinary breakfast, not noticing much or being noticed,

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sitting at the counter in the restaurant on the ground floor of the converted hotel where I rented my apartment. The waitress wore green, although her hair was black. Once I had tried half-heartedly to talk to her, to know her, to make out, but she had kept on working and loafing, talking to me and everyone else alike.

When the sun was near going down, I started for work as usual. I bought the usual newspaper to take along, but did not read it when I saw the headline PEACE TALKS FAILING. That evening I felt the way I supposed a lover should feel, going to his beloved.

Dan and two other guards greeted me with smiles of the kind that people wear when things that are clearly not their fault are going wrong for their employer. They told me that the pseudo-prowler had once more visited gallery two-fifteen, had vanished as usual from the panel just as a guard approached that room, and then had several times appeared on the indicators for gallery two-twenty-seven. I went to two-twenty-seven, making a show of carrying in tools and equipment, and settled myself on a bench in a dim corner, to wait.

The contentment I had known for twenty-four hours became impatience, and with slowly passing time the tension of impatience made me uncontrollably restless. I felt sure that she could somehow watch me waiting; she must know I was waiting for her; she must be able to see that I meant her no harm. Beyond meeting her, I had no plan at all.

Not even a guard came to disturb me. Around me, in paint and bronze and stone and welded steel, crowded the tortured visions of the Twentieth Century. I got up at last in desperation and found that not everything was torture. There on the wall were Monet's water lilies; at first nothing but vague flat shapes of paint, then the surface of a pond and a deep curve of reflected sky. I grew dizzy staring into that water, a dizziness of relief that made me laugh. When I looked away at last, the walls and ceiling were shimmering as if the glare of the night lights was reflected from Monet's pond.

I understood then that something was awry, something was being done to me, but I could not care. Giggling at the world, I stood there breathing air that seemed to sparkle in my lungs. The auburn-haired girl came to my side and took my arm and guided me to the bench where my unused equipment lay.

Her voice had the beauty I had expected, though with a strange strong accent. "Oh, I am sorry to make you weak and sick. But you insist to stay here and span much time, the time in which I must do my work."

For the moment I could say

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nothing. She made me sit on the bench, and bent over me with concern, turning her head with something of the same questioning look as the girl in the Rembrandt painting. Again she said, "Oh, I am sorry."

"S'all right." My tongue was heavy, and I still wanted to laugh.

She smiled and hurried away, flowed away. Again she was dressed in a green stretch suit, setting off the color of her hair. This time she vanished from my sight in normal fashion, going around one of the gallery's low partitions. Coming from behind that partition were flashes of light.

I got unsteadily to my feet and went after her. Rounding the corner, I saw three devices set up on tripods, the tripods spaced evenly around the *Reclining Figure.* From the three devices, which I could not begin to identify, little lances of light flicked like stings or brushes at the sculpture. And whirling around it like dancers, on silent rubbery feet, moved another pair of machine-shapes, busy with some purpose that was totally beyond me.

The girl reached to support me as I swayed. Her hands were strong, her eyes were darkly blue, and she was tall in slender curves. Smiling, she said, "It is all right, I do no harm."

"I don't care about that," I said. "I want only—not to tangle things with you."

"What?" She smiled, as if at someone raving. She had drugged me, with subtle gasses in the air that sparkled in my lungs. I knew that but I did not care.

"I always hold back," I said, "and tangle things with people. Not this time. I want to love you without any of that. This is a simple miracle, and I just want it to go on. Now tell me your name."

She was so silent and solemn for a moment, watching me, that I feared that I had angered her. But then she shook her head and smiled again. "My name is Day-ell. Now don't fall down!" and she took her supporting arm away.

For the moment I was content without her touching me. I leaned against the partition and looked at her busy machines. "Will you steal our *Reclining Figure?*" I asked, giggling again as I wondered who would want it.

"Steal?" she was thoughtful. "The two greatest works of this house I must save. I will replace them with copies so well made that no one will ever know, before—" She broke off. After a moment she added, "Only you will know." And then she turned away to give closer attention to her silent and ragingly busy machines. When she made an adjustment on a tiny thing she held in her hand, there were suddenly two *Reclining Figures* visible, one of them smaller and transparent but growing larger, moving toward us from some dark and dis-

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tant space that was temporarily within the gallery.

I was thinking over and over what Day-ell had said. Addled and joyful, I plotted what seemed to me a clever compliment, and announced, "I know what the two greatest works in this house are."

"Oh?" The word in her voice was a soft bell. But she was still busy.

"One is Rembrandt's girl."

"You are right!" Day-ell, pleased, turned to me. "Last night I took that one to safety. Where I take them, the originals, they will be safe forever."

"But the best—is you." I pushed away from the partition. "I make you my girl. My love. Forever, if it can be. But how long doesn't matter."

Her face changed and her eyes went wide, as if she truly understood how marvelous were such words, from anyone, from grim Joe Ricci in particular. She took a step toward me.

"If you could mean that," she whispered, "then I would stay with you, in spite of everything."

My arms went round her and I could feel forever passing. "Stay, of course I mean it, stay with me."

"Come, Day-ell, come," intoned a voice, soft, but still having metal in its timbre. Looking over her shoulder, I saw the machine-shapes waiting, balancing motionless now on their silent feet. There was again only one *Reclining Figure.*

My thoughts were clearing and I said to her, "You're leaving copies, you said, and no one will know the difference, before. Before what? What's going to happen?"

When my girl did not answer, I held her at arms' length. She was shaking her head slowly, and tears had come into her eyes. She said, "It does not matter what happens, since I have found here a man of life who will love me. In my world there is no one like that. If you will hold me, I can stay."

My hands holding her began to shake. I said, "I won't keep you here, to die in some disaster. I'll go with you instead."

"Come, Day-ell, come." It was a terrible steel whisper.

And she stepped back, compelled by the machine-voice now that I had let her go. She said to me, "You must not come. My world is safe for paint, safe for bronze, not safe for men who love. Why do you think that we must steal—?"

She was gone, the machines and lights gone with her.

The *Reclining Figure* stands massive and immobile as ever, bronze blobs and curved holes, with a face like something scratched on by a child. Thump it with a knuckle, and it sounds hollowly. Maybe three hundred years' perspective is needed to see it as one of the two greatest in this house. Maybe eyes are needed, accustomed to more dimensions than

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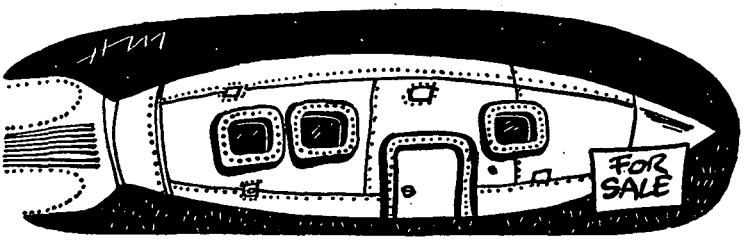
ours; eyes of those who sent Day-ell diving down through time to save choice fragments from the murky wreckage of the New Renaissance, plunged in the mud of the ignorant and boastful Twentieth Century.

Not that her world is better. *Safe for paint, safe for bronze, not safe for men who love.* I could not live there now.

The painting looks unchanged. A girl of seventeen still waits, frozen warmly in Rembrandt's light, three hundred years and more on the verge of smiling, secure that long from age and death and disappointment. But will a war incinerate her next week, or an earthquake swallow her next month? Or will our city convulse and die in mass rioting madness, a witches' Sabbath come true? What warning can I give? When they found me alone and weeping in the empty gallery that night, they talked about a nervous breakdown. The indicators on the Security panel are always quiet now, and I have let myself be argued out of the little of my story that I told.

No world is safe for those who love.



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Sterling Lanier introduced Brigadier Donald Ffellowes, late of her Majesty's forces, in SOLDIER KEY, *August 1968. It's a pleasure to have him back, and the Brigadier is in perfect form with this engrossing tale of an incredible family secret that is revealed on a lonely strip of Swedish coastline in the summer of '38.*

THE KINGS OF THE SEA

by Sterling E. Lanier

I DON'T REMEMBER HOW MAGIC came into the conversation at the club, but it had, somehow.

"Magic means rather different things to different people. To me . . ." Brigadier Donald Ffellowes, late of Her Majesty's forces, had suddenly begun talking. He generally sat, ruddy, very British and rather tired looking, on the edge of any circle. Occasionally he would add a date, a name, or simply nod, if he felt like backing up someone else's story. His own stories came at odd intervals and to many of us, frankly verged on the incredible, if not downright impossible. A retired artilleryman, Ffellowes now lived in New York, but his service had been all over the world, and in almost every branch of military life, including what seemed to be police or espionage work. That's really all there is to be said about either his stories or him, except that once he started one, no one ever interrupted him.

"I was attached to the embassy in Berlin in '38, and I went to Sweden for a vacation. Very quiet and sunny, because it was summer, and I stayed in Smaaland, on the coast, at a little inn. For a bachelor who wanted a rest, it was ideal, swimming every day, good food, and no newspapers, parades, crises or Nazis.

"I had a letter from a Swedish pal I knew in Berlin to a Swedish nobleman, a local landowner, a sort of squire in those parts. I was so absolutely happy and relaxed I

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quite forgot about going to see the man until the second week of my vacation, and when I did, I found he wasn't at home in any case.

"He owned a largish, old house about three miles from the inn, also on the coast road, and I decided to cycle over one day after lunch. The inn had a bike. It was a bright, still afternoon, and I wore my bathing trunks under my clothes, thinking I might get a swim either at the house or on the way back.

"I found the place easily enough, a huge, dark-timbered house with peaked roofs, which would look very odd over here, and even at home. But it looked fine there, surrounded by enormous old pine trees, on a low bluff over the sea. There was a lovely lawn, close cut, spread under the trees. A big lorry —you'd say a moving van—was at the door, and two men were carrying stuff out as I arrived. A middle-aged woman, rather smartly dressed, was directing the movers, with her back to me so that I had a minute or two to see what they were moving. One of them had just manhandled a largish black chair, rather archaic in appearance, into the lorry and then had started to lift a long, carved wooden chest, with a padlock on it, in after the chair. The second man, who must have been the boss mover, was arguing with the lady. I didn't speak too much Swedish, although I'm fair at German, but the two items I saw lifted into the van were apparently the cause of the argument, and I got the gist of it, you know.

" 'But Madame,' the mover kept on saying, 'Are you sure these pieces should be *destroyed*? They look very old.'

" 'You have been paid,' she kept saying, in a stilted way. 'Now get rid of it any way you like. Only take it away, now, at once.'

"Then she turned and saw me, and believe it or not, blushed bright red. The blush went away quickly, though, and she asked me pretty sharply what I wanted.

"I answered in English, that I had a letter to Baron Nyderstrom. She switched to English, which she spoke pretty well, and appeared a bit less nervous. I showed her the letter, which was a simple note of introduction, and she read it and actually smiled at me. She wasn't a bad-looking woman—about 45-48, somewhere in there, anyway—but she was dressed to the nines, and her hair was dyed an odd shade of metallic brown. Also, she had a really hard mouth and eyes.

" 'I'm so sorry,' she said, 'but the baron, who is my nephew, is away for a week and a half. I know he would have been glad to entertain an English officer friend of Mr.—' here she looked at the letter '—of Mr. Sorendson, but I'm afraid he is not around, while as you see, I am occupied. Perhaps another

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time?' She smiled brightly, and also rather nastily, I thought. 'Be off with you,' but polite.

"Well, really there was nothing to do except bow, and I got back on my bike and went wheeling off down the driveway.

"Halfway down the drive, I heard the lorry start, and I had just reached the road when it passed me, turning left, away from the direction of the inn, while I turned to the right.

"At that point something quite appalling happened. Just as the van left the drive, and also—as I later discovered—the estate's property line, something, a great weight, seemed to start settling over my shoulders, while I was conscious of a terrible cold, a cold which almost numbed me and took my wind away.

"I fell off the bike and half stood, half knelt over it, staring back after the dust of the lorry and completely unable to move. I remember the letters on the license and on the back of the van, which was painted a dark red. They said *Solvaag and Mechius, Stockholm.*

"I wasn't scared, mind you, because it was all too quick. I stood staring down the straight dusty road in the hot sun, conscious only of a terrible weight and the freezing cold, the weight pressing me down and the icy cold numbing me. It was as if time had stopped. And I felt utterly depressed, too, sick and, well, *hopeless.*

"Suddenly, the cold and the pressure stopped. They were just gone, as if they had never been, and I was warm, in fact, covered with sweat, and feeling like a fool there in the sunlight. Also, the birds started singing among the birches and pines by the road, although actually, I suppose they had been all along. I don't think the whole business took over a minute, but it seemed like hours.

"Well, I picked up the bike, which had scraped my shins, and started to walk along, pushing it. I could think quite coherently, and I decided I had had either a mild coronary or a stroke. I seemed to remember that you felt cold if you had a stroke. Also, I was really dripping with sweat by now and felt all swimmy; you'd say dizzy. After about five minutes, I got on the bike and began to pedal, slowly and carefully, back to my inn, deciding to have a doctor check me out at once.

"I had only gone about a third of a mile, numbed still by shock—after all I was only twenty-five, pretty young to have a heart attack or a stroke, either—when I noticed a little cove, an arm of the Baltic, on my right, which came almost up to the road, with tiny blue waves lapping at a small beach. I hadn't noticed it on the way to the baron's house, looking the other way, I guess, but now it looked like heaven. I was soaked with sweat, exhausted by my ex-

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perience, and now had a headache. That cool sea water looked really marvelous, and as I said earlier, I had my trunks on under my clothes. There was even a towel in the bag strapped to the bike.

"I undressed behind a large pine tree ten feet from the road, and then stepped into the water. I could see white sand for about a dozen feet out, and then it appeared to get deeper quickly. I sat down in the shallow water, with just my neck sticking out, and began to feel human again. Even the headache receded into the background. There was no sound but the breeze soughing in the trees and the chirping of a few birds, plus the splash of little waves on the shore behind me. I felt at peace with everything and shut my eyes, half sitting, half floating in the water. The sun on my head was warm.

"I don't know what made me open my eyes, but I must have felt something watching, some presence. I looked straight out to sea, the entrance of the little cove, as I opened them, and stared into a face which was looking at me from the surface of the water about eight feet away, right where it began to get deeper."

No one in the room had moved or spoken once the story had started, and since Ffellowes had not stopped speaking since he began, the silence as he paused now was oppressive, even the muted sound of traffic outside seeming far off and unreal.

He looked around at us, then lit a cigarette and continued steadily.

"It was about two feet long, as near as I could tell, with two huge, oval eyes of a shade of amber yellow, set at the corners of its head. The skin looked both white and vaguely shimmery; there were no ears or nose that I could see, and there was a big, wide, flat mouth, opened a little, with blunt, shiny, rounded teeth. But what struck me most was the rage in the eyes. The whole impression of the face was vaguely—only vaguely, mind you—serpentine, snakelike, except for those eyes. They were mad, furious, raging, and not like an animal's at all, but like a man's. I could see no neck. The face 'sat' on the water, so to speak.

"I had only a split second to take all this in, mind you, but I was conscious at once that whatever this was, it was livid at *me* personally, not just at people. I suppose it sounds crazy, but I *knew* this right off.

"I hadn't even moved, hadn't had a chance, when something flickered under the head, and a grip like a steel cable clamped onto my hip. I dug my heels in the sand and grabbed down, pushing as hard as I could, but I couldn't shake that grip. As I looked down, I saw what had hold of me and damn near fainted, because it was

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a hand. It was double the size of mine, dead white, and had only two fingers and a thumb, with no nails, but it was a hand. Behind it was a boneless-looking white arm like a giant snake or an eel, stretching away back toward the head, which still lay on the surface of the water. At the same time I felt the air as cold, almost freezing, as if a private iceberg was following me again, although not to the point of making me numb. Oddly enough, the cold didn't seem to be *in* the water, though I can't explain this very well.

"I pulled back hard, but I might as well have pulled at a tree trunk for all the good it did. Very steadily the pressure on my hip was increasing, and I knew that in a minute I was going to be pulled out to that head. I was kicking and fighting, splashing the water and clawing at that hand, but in the most utter silence. The hand and arm felt just like rubber, but I could feel great muscles move under the hard skin.

"Suddenly I began to scream. I knew my foothold on the bottom sand was slipping and I was being pulled loose so that I'd be floating in a second. I don't remember what I screamed, probably just yelling with no words. I knew for a certainty that I would be dead in thirty seconds, you see." He paused, then resumed.

"My vision began to blur, and I seemed to be slipping, mentally, not physically, into a blind, cold world of darkness. But still I fought, and just as I began to be pulled loose from my footing, I heard two sounds. One was something like a machine gun, but ringing through it I heard a human voice shouting and, I thought, shouting one long word. The shout was very strong, ringing and resonant, so resonant that it pierced through the strange mental fog I was in, but the word was in no language I knew. Then I blacked out, and that was that.

"When I opened my eyes, I was in a spasm of choking. I was lying face down on the little beach, my face turned sideways on my crossed arms, and was being given artificial respiration. I vomited up more water and then managed to choke out a word or two, probably obscene. There was a deep chuckle, and the person who had been helping me turned me over, so that I could see him. He pulled me up to a sitting position and put a tweed-clad arm around my shoulders, giving me some support while I recovered my senses.

"Even kneeling as he was, when I turned to look at him, I could see he was a very tall man, in fact, a giant. He was wearing a brown tweed suit with knickerbockers, heavy wool knee socks and massive buckled shoes. His face was extraordinary. He was what's called an ash-blond, almost white-haired, and his face was very long, with

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high cheekbones, and also very white, with no hint of color in the cheeks. His eyes were green and very narrow, almost Chinese looking, and terribly piercing. Not a man you would ever forget if you once got a look at him. He looked about thirty-five, and was actually thirty, I later found out.

"I was so struck by his appearance, even though he was smiling gently, that I almost forgot what had happened to me. Suddenly I remembered though, and gave a convulsive start and tried to get up. As I did so, I turned to look at the water, and there was the cove, calm and serene, with no trace of that thing, or anything else.

"My new acquaintance tightened his grip on my shoulders and pulled me down to a sitting position, speaking as he did so.

" 'Be calm, my friend. You have been through a bad time, but it is gone now. You are safe.'

"The minute I heard his voice, I knew it was he who had shouted as I was being pulled under. The same timbre was in his speech now, so that every word rang like a bell, with a concealed purring under the words.

"I noticed more about him now. His clothes were soaked to the waist, and on one powerful hand he wore an immense ring set with a green seal stone, a crest. Obviously he had pulled me out of the water, and equally obviously, he was no ordinary person.

" 'What was it,' I gasped finally, 'and how did you get me loose from it?'

"His answer was surprising. 'Did you get a good look at it?' He spoke in pure, unaccented 'British' English, I might add.

" 'I did,' I said with feeling. 'It was the most frightful, bloody thing I ever saw, and people ought to be warned about this coast! When I get to a phone, every paper in Sweden *and* abroad will hear about it. They ought to fish this area with dynamite!'

"His answer was a deep sigh. Then he spoke. 'Face-to-face, you have seen one of Jormungandir's Children,' he said, 'and that is more than I or any of my family have done for generations.' He turned to face me directly and continued, 'And I must add, my friend, that if you tell a living soul of what you have seen, I will unhesitatingly pronounce you a liar or a lunatic. Further, I will say I found you alone, having a seeming fit in this little bay, and saved you from what appeared to me to be a vigorous attempt at suicide.'

"Having given me this belly-punch, he lapsed into a brooding silence, staring out over the blue water, while I was struck dumb by what I had heard. I began to feel I had been saved from a deadly sea monster only to be captured by an apparent madman.

"Then he turned back to me, smiling again. 'I am called Baron

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Nyderstrom,' he said, 'and my house is just a bit down the road. Suppose we go and have a drink, change our clothes and have a bit of a chat.'

"I could only stammer, 'But your aunt said you were away, away for more than a week. I came to see you because I have a letter to you.' I fumbled in my bathing suit, and then lurched over to my clothes under the trees. I finally found the letter, but when I gave it to him, he stuck it in his pocket. 'In fact I was just coming from your house when I decided to have a swim here. I'd had a sick spell as I was leaving your gate, and I thought the cool water would help.'

" 'As you were leaving my gate?' he said sharply, helping me to get into my clothes. 'What do you mean "a sick spell", and what was that about my aunt?'

"As he assisted me, I saw for the first time a small, blue sports car, of a type unfamiliar to me, parked on the road at the head of the beach. It was in this, then, my rescuer had appeared. Half carrying, half leading me up the gentle slope, he continued his questioning, while I tried to answer him as best I could. I had just mentioned the lorry and the furniture as he got me into the left-hand bucket seat, having detailed in snatches my fainting and belief that I had had a mild stroke or heart spasm, when he got really stirred up.

"He levered his great body, and he must have been six foot-five, behind the wheel like lightning, and we shot off in a screech of gears and spitting of gravel. The staccato exhaust told me why I thought I had heard a machine gun while fighting that incredible thing in the water.

"Well, we tore back up the road, into and up his driveway, and without a word, he slammed on the brakes and rushed into the house as if all the demons of hell were at his heels. I was left sitting stupefied in the car. I was not only physically exhausted and sick, but baffled and beginning again to be terrified. As I looked around the pleasant green lawn, the tall trees and the rest of the sunny landscape, do you know I wondered if through some error in dimensions, I had fallen out of my own proper space and landed in a world of monsters and lunatics!

"It could only have been a moment when the immense figure of my host appeared in the doorway. On his fascinating face was an expression which I can only describe as being mingled half sorrow, half anger. Without a word, he strode down his front steps and over to the car where, reaching in, he picked me up in his arms as easily as if I had been a doll instead of 175 pounds of British subaltern.

"He carried me up the steps and as he walked, I could hear him murmuring to himself in Swedish. It sounded to me like gibberish,

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with several phrases I could just make out being repeated over and over. 'What could they do, what else could they do! She would not be warned. What else could they do?'

"We passed through a vast dark hall, with great beams high overhead, until we came to the back of the house, and into a large sunlit room, overlooking the sea, which could only be the library or study. There were endless shelves of books, a huge desk, several chairs, and a long, low padded window seat on which the baron laid me down gently.

"Going over to a closet in the corner, he got out a bottle of aquavit and two glasses, and handed me a full one, taking a more modest portion for himself. When I had downed it—and I never needed a drink more—he pulled up a straight-backed chair and set it down next to my head. Seating himself, he asked my name in the most serious way possible, and when I gave it, he looked out of the window a moment.

" 'My friend,' he said finally, 'I am the last of the Nyderstroms. I mean that quite literally. Several rooms away, the woman you met earlier today is dead, as dead as you yourself would be, had I not appeared on the road, and from the same, or at least a similar cause. The only difference is that she brought this fate on herself, while you, a stranger, were almost killed by accident, and simply because you were present at the wrong time.' He paused and then continued with the oddest sentence, although, God knows, I was baffled already. 'You see,' he said, 'I am a kind of game warden and some of my charges are loose.'

"With that, he told me to lie quiet and started to leave the room. Remembering something, however, he came back and asked if I could remember the name of the firm which owned the mover's lorry I had seen. Fortunately I could, for as I told you earlier, it was seared on my brain by the strange attack I had suffered while watching it go up the road. When I gave it to him, he told me again not to move and left the room for another, from which I could hear him faintly using a telephone. He was gone a long time, perhaps half an hour, and by the time he came back, I was standing looking at his books. Despite the series of shocks I had gone through, I now felt fairly strong, but it was more than that. This strange man, despite his odd threat, had saved my life, and I was sure that I was safe from *him* at least. Also, he was obviously enmeshed in both sorrow and some danger, and I felt strongly moved to try and give him a hand.

"As he came back into the room, he looked hard at me, and I think he read what I was thinking, because he smiled, displaying a fine set of teeth.

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" 'So—once again you are yourself. If your nerves are strong, I wish you to look on my late aunt. The police have been summoned and I need your help.'

"Just like that! A dead woman in the house and he needed my help!

"Well, if he was going to get rid of me, why call the police? Anyway, I felt safe as I told you, and you'd have to see the man, as I did, to know why.

"At any rate, we went down the great hall to another room, much smaller, and then through that again until we found ourselves in a little sewing room, full of women's stuff and small bits of fancy furniture. There in the middle of the room lay the lady whom I had seen earlier telling the movers to go away. She certainly appeared limp, but I knelt and felt her wrist because she was lying face down. Sure enough, no pulse at all and quite cold. But when I started to turn her over, a huge hand clamped on my shoulder and the baron spoke. 'I don't advise it,' he said warningly. 'Her face isn't fit to look at. She was frightened to death, you see.'

"I simply told him I had to, and he just shrugged his shoulders and stepped back. I got my hands under one shoulder and started to turn the lady, but my God, as the profile came into view, I dropped her and stood up like a shot. From the little I saw, her mouth was drawn back like an animal's, showing every tooth, and her eye was wide open and glaring in a ghastly manner. That was enough for me.

"Baron Nyderstrom led me from the room and back into the library, where we each had another aquavit in silence.

"I started to speak, but he held up his hand in a kind of command, and started talking.

" 'I shall tell the police that I passed you bathing on the beach, stopped to chat, and then brought you back for a drink. We found my aunt dead of heart failure and called the police. Now, sir, I like you, but if you will not attest to this same story, I shall have to repeat what I told you I would say at the beach, and I am well known in these parts. Also, the servants are away on holiday, and I think you can see that it would look ugly for you.'

"I don't like threats, and it must have showed, because although it would have looked bad as all hell, still I wasn't going to be a party to any murders, no matter how well-planned. I told him so, bluntly, and he looked sad and reflective, but not particularly worried.

" 'Very well', he said at length, 'I can't really blame you, because you are in a very odd position.' His striking head turned toward the window in brief thought, and then he turned back to face me directly and spoke.

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" 'I will make a bargain with you. Attest my statement to the police, and then let me have the rest of the day to talk to you. If, at the end of the day, I have not satisfied you about my aunt's death, you have my word, solemnly given, that I will go to the police station and attest *your* story, the fact that I have been lying and anything else you choose to say.'

"His words were delivered with great gravity, and it never for one instant occurred to me to doubt them. I can't give you any stronger statement to show you how the man impressed me. I agreed straightaway.

"In about ten minutes the police arrived, and an ambulance came with them. They were efficient enough, and very quick, but there was one thing that showed through the whole of the proceedings, and it was that the Baron Nyderstrom was *somebody!* All he did was state that his aunt had died of a heart attack and that was that! I don't mean the police were serfs, or crooks either for that matter. But there was an attitude of deference very far removed from servility or politeness. I doubt if royalty gets any more nowadays, even in England. When he had told me earlier that his name was 'known in these parts', it was obviously the understatement of the decade.

"Well, the police took the body away in the ambulance, and the baron made arrangements for a funeral parlor and a church with local people over the telephone. All this took awhile, and it must have been 4:30 when we were alone again.

"We went back into the library. I should mention that he had gotten some cold meat, bread and beer from a back pantry, just after the police left, and so now we sat down and made ourselves some sandwiches. I was ravenous, but he ate quite lightly for a man of his size, in fact only about a third of what I did.

"When I felt full, I poured another glass of an excellent beer, lit a cigarette, sat back and waited. With this man, there was no need of unnecessary speech.

"He was sitting behind his big desk facing me, and once again that singularly attractive smile broke through.

" 'You are waiting for your story, my friend, if I may call you so. You shall have it, but I ask your word as a man of honor that it not be for repetition.' He paused briefly. 'I know it is yet a further condition, but if you do not give it, there is no recourse except the police station and jail for me. If you do, you will hear a story and perhaps —perhaps, I say, because I make no promises—see and hear something which no man has seen or heard for many, many centuries, save only for my family and not many of them. What do you say?'

"I never hesitated for a second.

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I said 'yes', and I should add that I've never regretted it. No, never."

Ffellowes' thoughts seemed far away, as he paused and stared out into the murky New York night, dimly lit by shrouded street lamps, and the fog lights on passing cars. No one spoke, and no sound broke the silence of the room but a muffled cough. He continued.

"Nyderstrom next asked me if I knew anything about Norse mythology. Now this question threw me for an absolute loss. What did a dangerous animal and an awful death have to do with Norse mythology, to say nothing of a possible murder?

"However, I answered I'd read of Odin, Thor, and a few other gods as a child in school, the Valkyries, of course, and that was about it.

" 'Odin, Thor, the Valkyries, and a few others?' My host smiled, 'You must understand that they are rather late Norse and even late German adaptions of something much older. Much, much older, something with its roots in the dawn of the world.

" 'Listen,' he went on, speaking quietly but firmly, 'and when I have finished we will wait for that movers' truck to return. I was able to intercept it, and what it took, because of that very foolish woman, must be returned.'

"He paused as if at a loss how to begin, and then went on. His bell-like voice remained muted, but perfectly audible, while he detailed one of the damnedest stories I've ever heard. If I hadn't been through what I had that day, and if he hadn't been what he was, I could have thought I was listening to the Grand Master of all the lunatics I'd ever met.

" 'Long ago,' he said 'my family came from inner Asia. They were some of the people the latercomers called *Aesir,* the gods of Valhalla, but they were not gods, only a race of wandering conquerors. They settled here, on this spot, despite warnings from the few local inhabitants, a small, dark, shore-dwelling folk. This house is built on the foundations of a fortress, a very old one, dating at the very least back to the Second Century B.C. It was destroyed later in the wars of the Sixteenth Century, but that is modern history.

" 'At any rate, my remote ancestors began soon to lose people. Women bathing, boys fishing, even full-grown warriors out hunting, they would vanish and never return. Children had to be guarded and so did the livestock, which had a way of disappearing also, although that of course was preferable to the children.

" 'Finally, for no trace of the mysterious marauders could be found, the chief of my family decided to move away. He had prayed to his gods and searched zealously, but the reign of silent, stealthy terror never ceased, and

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no human or other foe could be found.

" 'But before he gave up, the chief had an idea. He sent presents and a summons to the shaman, the local priest, not of our own people, but of the few, furtive, little shore folk, the strand people, who had been there when we came. We despised and avoided them, but we had never harmed them. And the bent little shaman came and answered the chief's questions.

" 'What he said amounted to this. We, that is my people, had settled on the land made sacred in the remote past to Jormungandir. Now Jormungandir in the standard Norse sagas and myths is the great, world-circling sea serpent, the son of the renegade Aesir Loki and a giantess. He is a monster who on the day of Ragnarok will arise to assault Asgard. But actually, these myths are based on something quite, quite different. The ancient Jormungandir was a god of the sea all right, but he was here before any Norsemen, and he had children, who were semi-mortal and very, very dangerous. All the Asgard business was invented later, by people who did not remember the reality, which was both unpleasant and a literal, living menace to ancient men.

" 'My ancestor, the first of our race to rule here, asked what he could do to abate the menace. Nothing, said the shaman, except go away. Unless, if the chief were brave enough, he, the shaman, could summon the Children of the God, and the chief could ask *them* how *they* felt!

" 'Well, my people were anything but Christians in those days, and they had some rather nasty gods of their own. Also, the old chief, my ancestor, was on his mettle, and he liked the land he and his tribe had settled. So—he agreed, and although his counselors tried to prevent him, he went alone at night to the shore with the old shaman of the shore people. And what is more, he returned.

" 'From that day to this we have always lived here on this stretch of shore. There is a vault below the deepest cellar where certain things are kept and a ceremony through which the eldest son of the house of Nyderstrom must pass. I will not tell you more about it save to say that it involves an oath, one we have never broken, and that the other parties to the oath would not be good for men to see. You should know, for you have seen one!'

"I had sat spellbound while this rigmarole went on, and some of the disbelief must have showed in my eyes, because he spoke rather sharply all at once.

" 'What do you think the Watcher in the Sea was, the "animal" that seized you? If it had been anyone else in that car but myself —!'

"I nodded, because after recall-

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ing my experience on my swim, I was less ready to dismiss his story, and I had been in danger of forgetting my adventure. I also apologized and he went on talking.

" 'The woman you spoke to was my father's much younger sister, a vain and arrogant woman of no brainpower at all. She lived a life in what is now thought of as society, in Stockholm, on a generous allowance from me, and I have never liked her. Somewhere, perhaps as a child, she learned more than she should about the family secret, which is ordinarily never revealed to our women.

" 'She wished me to marry and tried ceaselessly to entrap me with female idiots of good family whom she had selected.

" 'It is true that I must someday marry, but my aunt irritated me beyond measure, and I finally ordered her out of the house and told her that her allowance would cease if she did not stop troubling me. She was always using the place for house parties for her vapid friends, until I put a stop to it.

" 'I knew when I saw her body what she had done. She must have found out that the servants were away and that I would be gone for the day. She sent men from Stockholm. The local folk would not obey such an order from her, in my absence. She must have had duplicate keys, and she went in and down and had moved what she should never have seen, let alone touched. It was sacrilege, no less, and of a very real and dangerous kind. The fool thought the things she took held me to the house, I imagine.

" 'You see,' he went on, with more passion in his voice than I had previously heard. *'They* are not responsible. They do not see things as we do. They regarded the moving of those things as the breaking of a trust, and they struck back. You appeared, because of the time element, to have some connection, and they struck at you. You do see what I mean, *don't* you?'

"His green eyes fixed themselves on me in an open appeal. He actually wanted sympathy for what, if his words were true, must be the damnedest set of beings this side of madness. And even odder, you know, he had got it. I had begun to make a twisted sense of what he said, and on that quiet evening in the big shadowed room, I seemed to feel an ancient and undying wrong, moreover one which badly needed putting right.

"He seemed to sense this and went on, more quietly.

" 'You know, I still need your help. Your silence later, but more immediate help now. Soon that lorry will be here and the things it took must be restored.

" 'I am not now sure if I can heal the breach. It will depend on the Others. If they believe me, all

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will go as before. If not—well, it was my family who kept the trust, but also who broke it. I will be in great danger, not only to my body but also to my soul. Their power is not all of the body.

" 'We have never known,' he went on softly, 'why they love this strip of coast. It is not used so far as we know, for any of their purposes, and they are subject to our emotions or desires in any case. But they do, and so the trust is honored.'

"He looked at his watch and murmured 'six o'clock'. He got up and went to the telephone, but as his hand met the receiver, we both heard something.

"It was a distant noise, a curious sound, as if, far away somewhere, a wet piece of cloth were being dragged over stone. In the great silent house, the sound could not be localized, but it seemed to me to come from deep below us, perhaps in a cellar. It made my hair stiffen.

" 'Hah,' he muttered. 'They are stirring. I wonder—'

"As he spoke, we both became conscious of another noise, one which had been growing upon us for some moments unaware, that of a powerful motor engine. Our minds must have worked together for as the engine noise grew, our eyes met and we both burst into simultaneous gasps of relief. It could only be the furniture van, returning at last.

"We both ran to the entrance. The hush of evening lay over the estate, and shadows were long and dark, but the twin lights turning into the drive cast a welcome luminance over the entrance.

"The big lorry parked again in front of the main entrance, and the two workmen I had seen earlier got out. I could not really understand the rapid gunfire Swedish, but I gathered the baron was explaining that his aunt had made a mistake. At one point both men looked appalled, and I gathered that Nyderstrom had told them of his aunt's death. (He told me later that he had conveyed the impression that she was unsound mentally: it would help quiet gossip when they saw a report of the death).

"All four of us went around to the rear of the van, and the two men opened the doors. Under the baron's direction they carried out and deposited on the gravel the two pieces of furniture I had seen earlier. One was the curious chair. It did not look terribly heavy, but it had a box bottom, solid sides instead of legs and no arm rests. Carved on the oval-topped head was a hand grasping a sort of trident, and when I looked closely, I got a real jolt. The hand had only two fingers and a thumb, all without nails, and I suddenly felt in my bones the reality of my host's story.

"The other piece was the small,

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plain, rectangular chest, a bit like a large toy chest, with short legs ending in feet like a duck's. I mean three-toed and *webbed,* not the conventional 'duck foot' of the antique dealers.

"Both the chair and the chest were made of a dark wood, so dark it looked oily, and they had certainly not been made yesterday.

"Nyderstrom had the two men put the two pieces in the front hall and then paid them. They climbed back into their cab, so far as I could make out, apologizing continuously for any trouble they might have caused. We waved from the porch and then watched the lights sweep down the drive and fade into the night. It was fully dark now, and I suddenly felt a sense of plain old-fashioned fright as we stood in silence on the dark porch.

" 'Come,' said the baron, suddenly breaking the silence, 'we must hurry. I assume you will help?'

" 'Certainly,' I said. I felt I had to, you see, and had no lingering doubts at all. I'm afraid that if he'd suggested murdering someone, by this time I'd have agreed cheerfully. There was a compelling, hypnotic power about him. Rasputin was supposed to have had it and Hitler also, although I saw *him* plenty, and never felt it. At any rate, I just couldn't feel that anything this man wanted was wrong.

"We manhandled the chair and the chest into the back of the house, stopping at last in a back hall in front of a huge oaken door, which appeared to be set in a stone wall. Since the house was made of wood, this stone must have been part of the original building, the ancient fort, I guess, that he'd mentioned earlier.

"There were three locks on the door, a giant old padlock, a smaller newer one and a very modern-looking combination. Nyderstrom fished out two keys, one of them huge, and turned them. Then, with his back to me, he worked the combination. The old house was utterly silent, and there was almost an atmospheric hush, the kind you get when a bad thunderstorm is going to break. Everything seemed to be waiting, waiting for something to happen.

"There was a click and Nyderstrom flung the great door open. The first thing I noticed was that it was lined with steel on the other, inner side, and the second, that it opened on a broad flight of shallow steps leading down on a curve out of sight into darkness. The third impression was not visual at all. A wave of odor, strong but not unpleasant, of tide pools, seaweed and salt air poured out of the opening. And there were several large patches of water on the highest steps, large enough to reflect the light.

"Nyderstrom closed the door again gently, not securing it, and

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turned to me. He pointed, and I now saw on one wall of the corridor to the left of the door, about head height, a steel box, also with a combination lock. A heavy cable led from it down to the floor. Still in silence, he adjusted the combination and opened the box. Inside was a knife switch, with a red handle. He left the box open and spoke, solemnly and slowly.

" 'I am going down to a confrontation. You must stay right here, with the door open a little, watching the steps. I may be half an hour, but at most three quarters. If I come up *alone,* let me out. If I come up *not* alone, slam the door, turn the lock and throw that switch. Also if anything *else* comes up, do so. This whole house, under my direction, and at my coming of age, was extensively mined and you will have exactly two and a half minutes to get as far as possible from it. Remember, at *most,* three quarters of an hour. At the end of that time, even if nothing has happened, you will throw that switch and run . . . !'

"I could only nod. There seemed to be nothing to say, really.

"He seemed to relax a little, patted me on the shoulders, and turned to unlock the strange chest. Over his shoulder he talked to me as he took things out. 'You are going to see one thing at any rate, a true Sea King in full regalia. Something, my friend, no one has seen who is not a member of my family since the late Bronze Age.'

"He stood up and began to undress quickly, until he stood absolutely naked. I have never seen a more wonderful figure of a man, pallid as an ivory statue, but huge and splendidly formed. On his head, from out of the stuff in the chest, he had set a narrow coronet, only a band in the back, but rising to a flanged peak in front. Mounted in the front peak was a plaque on which the three-fingered hand and trident were outlined in purple gems. The thing was solid gold. Nyderstrom then stooped and pulled on a curious, short kilt, made of some scaly hide, like a lizard's and colored an odd green-gold. Finally, he took in his right hand a short, curved, gold rod, ending in a blunt, stylized trident.

"We looked at each other a moment and then he smiled. 'My ancestors were very successful Vikings,' he said, still smiling. 'You see, they always could call on *help.*'

"With that, he swung the door open and went marching down the steps. I half shut it behind him and settled down to watch and listen.

"The sound of his footsteps receded into the distance, but I could still hear them in the utter silence for a long time. His family vault, which I was sure connected somehow with the sea, was a long way down. I crouched, tense, wondering if I would ever see him again. The whole business was utterly mad, and I believed every word of it. I still do.

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"The steps finally faded into silence. I checked my watch and found ten minutes had gone by.

"Suddenly, as if out of an indefinite distance, I heard his voice. I recognized it instantly, for it was a long quavering call, sonorous and bell-like, very similar to what I had heard when he rescued me in the afternoon. The sound came from far down in the earth, echoing faintly up the dank stairs and died into silence. Then it came again, and when it died, yet again.

"My heart seemed to stop. I knew that this brave man was summoning something no man had a right to see and calling a council in which no one with human blood in his veins should sit.

"Silence, utter and complete, followed. I could hear nothing, save for an occasional faint drop of water falling somewhere out of my range of vision.

"I glanced at my watch. Twenty-one minutes had gone by. The minutes seemed to crawl endlessly, meaninglessly. I felt alone and in a strange dream, unable to move, frozen, an atom caught in a mesh beyond my comprehension.

"Then far away, I heard it, a faint sound. It was faint but regular, and increasing in volume, measured and remorseless. It was a tread, and it was coming up the stair in my direction.

"I glanced at my watch, thirty-four minutes. It could be my friend, still within his self-appointed limits of time. The step came nearer, nearer still. It was, so far as my straining ear could judge, a single step. It progressed further, and suddenly into the circle of light stepped Nyderstrom.

"He was alone and as he came up he waved in greeting. He was dripping wet and the light gleamed on his shining body. I threw the door wide and he stepped through.

"As his head emerged into the light, I stepped back, almost involuntarily. There was a look of exhaltation and wonder on it, such as I have never seen on a human face. The strange green eyes flashed, and there was a faint flush on the high cheekbones. He looked like a man who has seen a vision of Paradise.

"He walked rather wearily, but firmly, over to the switch box, which he closed and locked. Then he turned to me, still with that blaze of radiance on his face.

" 'All is well, my friend. They are again at peace with men. They have accepted me and the story of what has happened. All will be well now, with my house, and with me.'

"I stared at him hard, but he said no more and began to divest himself of his incredible regalia. He had one more thing to say, and I can hear it still as if it were yesterday, spoken almost as an afterthought.

" 'They say the blood of the guardians is getting too thin again. But that also is settled. I have seen my bride.' " ◄

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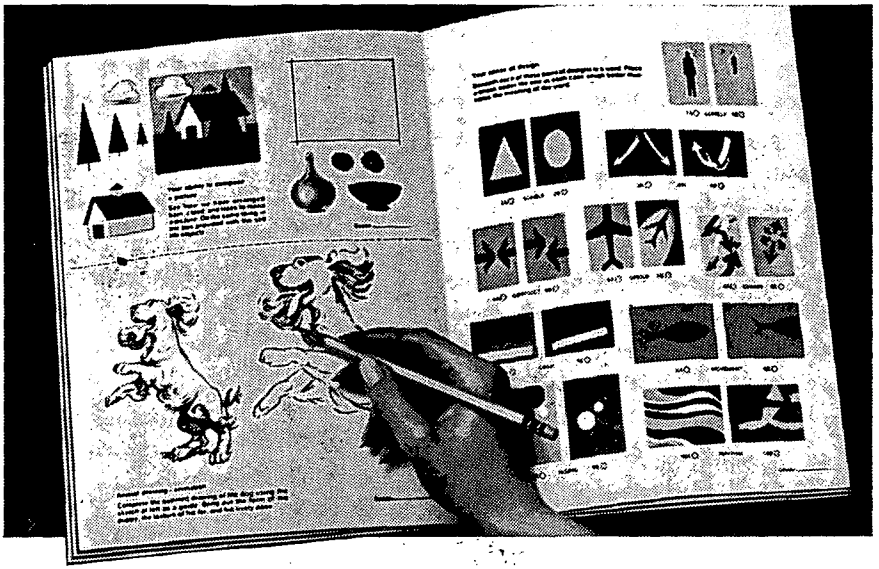

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